

“WHO DO YOU MEAN?” INVESTIGATING MISCOMMUNICATION IN PAIRED INTERACTIONS

Jonathon Ryan and Roger Barnard
University of Waikato

Abstract

Professional experience, as well as a great deal of published research (e.g. Gass & Varonis, 1991; Varonis & Gass, 1985a), suggests that even successful users of English as a second language unwittingly give rise to communication problems when encoding and decoding certain features of language, both linguistic and pragmatic. Among the latter is the issue of referring (for example, by pronouns or lexical substitution) to people, places and objects not in the immediate context. This paper, based on a wider study, outlines a procedure in which teachers were asked, via stimulated recall sessions, to reflect on previously-recorded pair work interactions and to discuss occasions where problematic communication occurred, or did not occur. Close analysis of transcript data reveals that potentially significant misleading stimuli may not eventuate in any failure of communication, while apparently trivial slips could cause considerable misunderstanding. It is suggested that teacher-researchers might usefully adapt a procedure such as that used in the study for their own professional development, for use in class, and as the basis for action research projects.

Introduction

Communication breakdowns are a feature of any oral interaction, even in conversations between ‘native-speakers’ (NSs) of the language. (Although we dislike the term, we will use it in this article for the sake of convenience.) Strained communication is of course more likely to occur between NSs of English and even successful second language learners, and it may not be easy for either party to identify the precise nature of the breakdown and to repair the situation, or in some cases to even be aware of miscommunication.

Therefore, it is important for language teachers to be sensitive not only to the frequency of miscommunication in oral interactions, but of the range of causes for the inability of the language learner to make his/her meaning clear. At one level, this may be a matter of a lack of mastery of linguistic features, such as faulty pronunciation, inappropriate lexical choice, awkward syntax, and so on. In many informal interactions, the interlocutor - assuming that s/he identifies an occurrence of miscommunication - can interrupt the speaker to ask for clarification. But often communication may

be strained or fail altogether because of implicit pragmatic features where each party initially makes wrong assumptions about the extent of shared knowledge about events, places and people not in the immediate environment. What follows in the conversation may clarify the situation, but in the meantime the two interlocutors might be at cross-purposes, and it is possible that the listener may end the conversation with completely the wrong idea in his or her mind.

To discuss this issue in more depth, this paper reports a study in which dyads of second language teachers and learners took part in a two-part interaction. Firstly, they watched together a clip from a movie, and then the teacher left the room while the learner carried on watching the film. The teacher returned and asked to be told what had happened in his absence. After that conversation, the researcher invited the teacher to discuss the extent to which strained or mis-communication occurred during that second interaction. The findings indicate some interesting implications for the analysis of oral communication, and we feel that the ideas suggested in this study could be modified by teachers for classroom use, or as an exercise in reflective practice, and also as a focus for action research.

Communication and miscommunication in interactions

Successful communication is a complex notion, in which it is possible to take a broad view of the factors involved, looking not only at the degree of success in communicating meaning, but at the entire act of communication. This can include notions as diverse as the participants’ non-engagement (Gass & Varonis, 1991, pp. 123-124) versus their willingness to communicate (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels, 1998), based on personality factors, source and strength of motivation and instrumental goals, identity goals, outcomes, relationships, and ideological analysis, to name but a few (see Coupland, Wiemann & Giles, 1991, for an integrative model of miscommunication). Correspondingly, miscommunication may be analysed at very broad levels, (e.g. Bosco, Bucciarelli & Bara, 2006). However the present article, like Wu and Keysar (2007), limits the focus to the transmission of information. For these purposes then, successful communication is considered here to involve the listener interpreting the meaning of an utterance as *the speaker intended* it to be interpreted. It occurs when interlocutors adhere both to linguistic rules and Grice’s cooperative principle and the conversational maxims of quality, quantity, relation, and manner (Grice, 1989) that arise from these.

Clark (1996) proposes a model of communication in which language use is considered a *joint action*, which is defined as “one that is carried out by an ensemble of people acting in coordination with each other” (p. 3). According to this model, speakers and listeners have roles as individuals, as

well as collaborative roles, and together they strive to coordinate the speaker's meaning with the addressee's understanding. Much of this coordination is achieved through linguistic conventions, in which both parties share an understanding of how language is typically used by a speech community, and perhaps by the individuals in question. These conventions include those of lexis (including the meanings of words, phrases, and morphemes), grammar (phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic rules), and conventions of use (such as sociolinguistic information). However, coordination must also be reached when language is used non-conventionally, such as when context plays a role in determining the speaker's meaning, and in the use of semantically ambiguous words, or truncated syntax.

In comparison with interactions among native speakers of a language, coordination in discourse between NSs and NNSs is distinctly lower in all areas of conventional language use. A single stretch of discourse may contain multiple errors in lexis, grammar, and usage. It therefore seems that there is likely to be a greater role for context-specific interpretation in NS-NNS discourse. However, evidence suggests that non-conventional coordination is also typically lower in such discourse due to issues such as differences in 'common ground' (Clark, 1996), for example differences in shared cultural knowledge. For example, Varonis and Gass argue that a lack of common ground in NS-NNS discourse arising from "different customs, modes of interacting, [and] notions of appropriateness" is a crucial factor in miscommunication (1985a, p. 327) and suggest that problematic communication may result from any one, or any combination, of non-coordination over world views, cultural assumptions, and linguistic resources.

The inconsistency of terminology relating to problematic communication has been widely remarked on (e.g. Dascal, 1999, p.753-754; Gass & Varonis, 1991, p.123). For the present purposes, we will distinguish two broad types of problematic communication, with the terms adopted here being 'strained communication' and 'miscommunication'.

Table 1: Types of communication problem

Broad category	Communication problem
Strained communication	Sub-category
	Strained communication
	An utterance requiring a degree of processing out of proportion to the complexity of the sense
	Partial understanding
Miscommunication	Incomplete understanding, or understanding of gist but not details
	Repaired misunderstanding, e.g. 'garden path' utterances
	Failure to understand
	The listener is unable to understand the sense of the expression
	Misunderstanding
	'I thought you meant something else'

The issue of problematic communication is important for language teachers in a number of respects. First of all, those working within the paradigm of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) need to have a more sophisticated understanding of communication theory than is usually presented in methodology books or professional development programmes (Robbins, 2003, p. 59). Secondly, since a major aim of most of CLT teachers is to enhance their learners' communicative competence, they need to have a firm hold of the practical implications of identifying--and subsequently analysing and dealing with --faulty communication when it occurs in their classes. For example, examinations such as IELTS and the new ICB format of TOEFL require students to understand and transmit meaningful messages, and they need to be adequately prepared to do so without giving rise to strained or miscommunication. Also, there are implications regarding miscommunication arising from current thinking about the teaching of grammar, especially that which centres on the notion of Focus on Form (Long, 2000). This approach requires teachers to intervene in learners' communicative activities--to deal 'incidentally' and 'transitorily' with grammatical issues--only when communication breaks down (Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998), or is anticipated to do so (Doughty & Williams, 1998a). However, analyses of interactions between and with second language learners, such as those by Varonis and Gass (1985a and b), have revealed that any such intervention would be actually a rather more complex matter than might be suggested by many interaction studies within the mainstream paradigm of Second Language Acquisition research (for example, those carried out by Lyster 1998; 2004; and Lyster & Ranta, 1997). In the first place, apart from the practical difficulties of

monitoring several communication activities going on at the same time in a classroom, any intervention is likely to obtrude into the conversation and disrupt the flow of communication (Williams, 2005, p. 676). Moreover, it is not easy for an outside observer to gauge the actual or potential extent of communicative breakdown within pair or group interactions. Those actually involved are in a better position to judge, but even when one or other interactant does identify a problem, which is not always the case, it may not be within their pragmatic competence to avoid or repair any breakdown. Moreover, it is quite possible for the participants in a conversation to continue to 'communicate' but be unaware that each of them has devised a different mental picture of the content of the conversation, triggered by sometimes very trivial linguistic or pragmatic slips. For intervention to be unobtrusive and effective, what is needed is a focus based on 'an analysis of learner need rather than being imposed externally by a linguistic syllabus' (Doughty & Williams, 1998b, p. 5). However, it should be obvious that such an analysis cannot be carried out on the spot, but rather needs to be done *post hoc* based upon learners' oral production so that the causes, nature, and extent of potential communication breakdowns might more easily be identified, and a pedagogic strategy considered. One approach to doing this is suggested in the present study.

The present study

The empirical studies which have been reviewed provide reasonable inferences about the extent, nature, and source of miscommunication. However, none of the studies sought *the immediate interpretation of interlocutors to identify their perceptions of successful or unsuccessful communication*. This is the focus of the following report of part of a wider project examining the use of pragmatic reference by second language learners, and its role in miscommunication with NSs.

The wider study involves three sets of dyads, with data collected from ten dyads in each set: i) two native-speaking undergraduates; ii) a second language learner (SLL) and a native-speaking undergraduate; a (NS) English-language teacher and a SLL. The SLLs are all university students, mostly undergraduates in a first or second year academic writing course. As such, they had all reached a minimum level of proficiency of (or equivalent to) an overall IELTS score of 6.0. The extracts presented below are taken from an interaction and stimulated recall involving a male teacher and a male Chinese student from a second year writing course.

Following a number of previous studies (e.g. Chini, 2005; Klein & Perdue, 1992; Swierzbis, 2004), an edited, two-part version of the Chaplin film *Modern Times* was made as an elicitation device. As with

the pioneering uses of this movie as a research instrument (see Perdue, 1984, 1993), in the extracts which are illustrated below, the first part of the film is watched by both participants to create shared knowledge of aspects of the narrative. The (NS) teacher is then called to another room, and the SLL watches the second part alone. At the end of the film, the teacher returns to the room, and the learner is asked to recount what happened in the rest of the film. This conversation was both video- and audio recorded.

Unlike previous studies utilizing film recounts, the present study used stimulated recall to probe the teacher's understanding of the film recount immediately after the interaction. The video recording of the conversation was used as a stimulus to remind the teacher of what they were thinking at the time the learner was recounting the film events. During the session, this video recording was periodically paused and the teacher invited to explain what their mental picture was at that stage of the learner's recount. After this stage of the stimulated recall, the teacher was then shown the part of *Modern Times* that they had not watched and asked to comment and confirm or disconfirm that (un-)successful communication had taken place.



Findings and discussion

Miscommunication is a matter of discourse processes rather than of text. Thus while an analysis of transcribed speech may suggest *potential* for communicative strain or miscommunication, it often fails to reveal actual instances of miscommunication. The following examples from the interaction between the teacher and learner noted above support this position; that is, while an analysis of the linguistic errors in a transcript may suggest problematic communication on the part of the learner, the follow-up stimulated recall between the teacher and the researcher revealed that in fact the teacher formed an accurate impression of the events described. (Reference to the narrative of the film extract in the Appendix will clarify the context in each case.)

In the first example below, there are at least two linguistic errors which do not actually cause any communicative breakdown.

Extract #1: The factory manager and some others are observing the trial of the new machine.

NS-SLL interaction	Stimulated recall session
SLL: there is a manager and some peoples they look for this machine it's good	NS: The idea for me was that it was some sort of err business proposal almost, new invention, showing, [uh-huh] so they Charlie as a test, the managers are looking at it...

The first of these linguistic errors is the expression 'look for' rather than the intended 'look at'. The second is the omission of lexical and syntactic cues indicating both the manager's goal, and the hypothetical quality of the idea 'it's good'. A suggested reformulation would be 'they look at this machine to see *whether* it's good'. However, no such miscommunication, or even communicative strain, seemed to occur, as may be inferred from the native speaker's comment. In a number of examples, the use of gesture greatly clarified or enriched the linguistic message.

As shown in the following, a lexical error was repaired because of an accompanying gesture.

Extract #2: The machine feeds corn on the cob to Charlie.

NS-SLL interaction	Stimulated recall session
SLL: . . . when feeding: . Charlie with the . popcorn <-gestures with hands>> NS: Popcorn? SLL: Yep NS: oh corn SLL: oh corn, yeah, corn	RES: She said popcorn and you seemed to click automatically - nearly - that she meant cob of a corn NS: Yes RES: Is that right? NS: Yes, and it's only related to: the way she was moving her hands RES: Yeah, [and] NS: Because her hands didn't match what she was saying

As indicated by the teacher, the incongruity between the gesture and lexical item was immediately recognized, and although we may infer some communicative strain, the listener appears to quickly recognize the intended meaning, and indicates in the stimulated recall session that he was confident in this interpretation.

The pragmatic 'error' shown below was somewhat ambiguous on an initial hearing, but did not result in eventual miscommunication.

Extract #3: The manager picks Charlie to trial the machine.

NS-SLL interaction	Stimulated recall session
SLL: . . . the owner pick . d Charlie: . yea NS: Charlie Chaplin SLL: - yeah Charlie Chapman?, and they test: with the machine with him?, . and that machine was with like . . like . . for the: . eating machine, I don't know - like the machine give the food to the man, [yep] NS: [Ah]h SLL: the man just stand there, and the machine . NS: feeds [him?] SLL: [give] - yeah feed them automatically	RES: And now, he said feed the man, . and did [I] you think this was people in general or [no] did you have a sense of . . NS: no, I had a sense of that he was talking about feeding Charlie Chaplin specifically

One interpretation is that the learner has switched from specific reference to Charlie, to non-specific reference to a representative of wider class. In this case, either an indefinite article, or zero article with a plural noun is called for. An alternative possibility is that he is continuing to refer specifically to Charlie, in which case a pragmatically inappropriate strategy is being used: article + common noun, rather than the preferred pronoun or proper name. In either case, the linguistic forms used are those of specific reference to a second male character (i.e. not to Charlie, and not to a generic representative character). However, the comments from the native speaker reveal that no miscommunication occurred.

The above extracts indicate that miscommunication need not occur even when the learner's linguistic weakness might suggest otherwise. However, the following extracts from the same interaction reveal how miscommunication can arise from apparently trivial mispronunciations.

The following is an example of where mispronunciation may give rise to initial strain, but did not eventuate in any actual miscommunication.

Extract #4: The first part begins at lunchtime, and Charlie stops work.

NS-SLL interaction	Stimulated recall session
SLL: ah, second part is: . ah . time is /rnt/ time? And the #second the #second has two parts [rntm] the first part is lunchtime when . when Charlie was still working in the . er	RES: Just this initial, at this part, NS: With 'lunch time'? [Yeah] RES: [Yeah] or 'two parts' or NS: Yeah, I - I dunno, when he said lunch time. I wasn't 100% sure what he was actually meaning, was it 'launch time' or 'lunch time' RES: Ah, ok NS: But then after he said it a few times, you sort of # 'ah ok, it's lunch time' [ah] because they've taken a break, I think he mentioned [yep] break before, you sort of put two and two together [yep]. But it was initially, a little bit, yeah I was a bit unsure

At this point in the stimulated recall session, the researcher paused the video stimulus to ask a vague question as to what the native-speaker understood at this stage of the conversation. The teacher assumed that the pronunciation of 'lunch' was the issue - as this seems to have caused him some strain during the initial conversation. His strategy here was to allow

the learner to continue without seeking clarification, in the knowledge that the overall meaning--and perhaps the meaning of the particular unresolved expression--might become clear. Data from the wider study suggests that this strategy is quite common. This listening strategy appears to be motivated both by the effectiveness of 'top-down' comprehension strategies, and to avoid the stilted conversation and loss of face that may arise from interrupting the speaker.

The following is an example of either mis-pronunciation or an error in lexical choice ('choke' for 'shake') that does lead to miscommunication.

Extract #5: The workers stop for lunch. Charlie has developed a twitch from the repetitive movements of working on the production line. The soup spills when Charlie passes a soup bowl to his colleague.

NS-SLL interaction	Stimulated recall session
SLL: ya know . ah factory [rntm] and comes to the ah lunchtime so they stop. And they got er . . . one guy behind got a soup and put it in a . a bowl, ya know, and Charlie was a little bit a little bit choking?	RES: At this point did you have a clear idea about who he was talking about an- . [where things were?] NS: [Yeah, I mean] . yeah, I mean, he said it, quite explicitly said there's a guy behind Charlie who had a bowl of soup, [yep] um, then all of a sudden Charlie's choking, so I mean, from that I got he's obviously given the soup to Charlie, and he's Charlie's eaten it and choked RES: Oh, ok NS: But I mean, he didn't, I dunno, he didn't actually say that that happened, so [but] but that's what I thought, but in looking back at things, he might've meant that the guy was choking: - I'm not sure, but initially I thought Charlie, he got the bowl of soup and he was eating it and choked RES: Right, ok NS: Yeah

It is important to note that the teacher *believed* that the communication had been clear (as indicated the italicized portions), and so this is a case of miscommunication rather than communication failure. In this case, the miscommunication arises from one mispronounced/misinterpreted word--'choke'--which entails the meaning 'eating', so the teacher inferred two actions (in addition to the choking) that were not intended by the learner: (1) the colleague giving the soup to Charlie, (2) Charlie eating the soup.

In what follows, the teacher wrongly attributes a cause and effect connection between the 'choking' and the 'lunch machine', and then develops quite a different interpretation of the function of the 'lunch machine'.

Extract #6: Charlie, still twitching, spills the soup over his colleague and on the floor. The manager enters with a new automatic feeding machine to trial on the workers. He chooses Charlie as the 'guinea pig'.

NS-SLL interaction	Stimulated recall session
SLL: the soup was . was spit [[spilt]] and goes all over the floor [mhm] and then the boss er . come to have a look and they bring like er a m- machine, like, erm . ah . . automatic lunch machine some[thing like that] NS: [@ok@] SLL: yeah, and put Charlie in chair? NS: yeah	RES: So at this point, what was your idea about what was happening? NS: So, . . I dunno, so the boss has come along and . um seen that Charlie's choking, so they bring some sort of automatic lunch machine along, . . I wasn't a <i>hundred per cent sure what he meant by automatic lunch machine</i> , [yeah] until: later on he explained that it cleaned him up, [right] but when he said automatic lunch machine, I mean: did it dispense sandwiches, did it -- you know

It is clear from the portion in italics that there was initially strained communication, which was then wrongly resolved by the listener -- it becomes miscommunication. Several factors are at work in this miscommunication. Firstly, the mispronunciation/misinterpretation of 'spilt' as 'spit' seems to reinforce the teacher's understanding that Charlie has eaten and choked (and subsequently spit) the soup. Secondly, the vague connector 'and' can function to signal both a sequential relation, and also a cause and effect relation (among others). This ambiguity leads the teacher to understand the arrival of the 'lunch machine' as a response to the

soup eating (choking and spilling) incident. Thirdly, this interpretation is later strengthened when the hearer misunderstands what the machine is doing, as can be seen below.

In the following example, strained communication which is initially not resolved (or tentatively, but inaccurately understood) is later resolved, but wrongly.

Extract #7: The machine gave Charlie some cake, wiped his mouth, and then gave him some corn on the cob.

NS-SLL interaction	Stimulated recall session
SLL: an- I they got er: first #one it was . . . er . . . can't remember, a cake? Yeah he got cake < . . > to eat? NS: mmhm SLL: and then got ah something like can . wipe his mouth? And later - an- . got a: /kon/, /kɔ/ and he can eat, and ah got-, corn #turning?	NS: Yep. That point, I wasn't sure if he meant 'comb' or 'cone'. RES: Ok NS: Um . I mean later on he said it 'brushed his face, brushed his teeth' so it might've been a comb or a brush or something like that RES: Ok NS: But I thought because he said 'cake', and then it might've been 'cone', like . ice cream cone sort of, RES: Right, yep NS: So until he said something about it brushing him up, um . then . yeah, I wasn't really . too sure

It is noteworthy that the learner clearly identified the machine as giving Charlie cake to eat, but the teacher had trouble reconciling this with what he (wrongly) understood to be the function of the machine -- which he believed to be to clean Charlie up. The teacher tolerates this ambiguity, especially when the machine wipes Charlie's mouth: this seems to reinforce his interpretation. The learner seems to acknowledge his difficulty in pronouncing 'corn', and has two attempts -- neither of which successfully communicates the idea of 'corn'. At this point, the teacher entertains two possibilities: that the learner is referring to 'cone' or to 'comb'. In the stimulated recall session, he reported that 'cone' seemed plausible because it connected semantically with 'cake', so at that point he was unsure. But later he mentally revised this to 'comb' because of the events that he misunderstood as taking place.

In what follows, the learner successfully communicates some of his intended message; however, the teacher misinterprets the overall function of the machine.

Extract #8: The corn cob is rotating and moving backwards and forwards so that Charlie can eat it. But then the machine goes haywire, and the corn starts going faster and faster across his mouth.

NS-SLL interaction	Stimulated recall session
SLL: and like, the <> typing machine is like turning and it goes right ah right left right left and then, the machine goes crazy [[talking faster]] and, goes really fast, and like brushing his mouth,	RES: So when he said 'a typing machine' before, you were thinking? NS: Typewriter RES: Yep NS: Yep RES: Ok. And how did that relate . do you think . to the: what he was saying? NS: Well, I mean, I thought it was a pretty good description of what the machine was doing. [right] it changed my sort of thinking about what the machine was RES: Right. So what was it doing? NS: Well, the brush was spinning, and it was going back and forward, [like a typewriter would, [uh-huh]] so then all of a sudden it went mental and. RES: Right, so that was quite a good description then NS: Well I thought it was, yeah RES: Yeah NS: I dunno if it was RIGHT

A key misunderstanding here is "like brushing his mouth" which was intended by the learner to have a comparative function (a simile) but is literally interpreted by the teacher. This has quite a significant effect on the latter's interpretation of the overall function of the machine. Previously, the teacher had thought the description of the machine's function was ambiguous or unclear, but "brushing his mouth" lends support to the idea of it being a cleaning machine, and thus erroneously confirms this interpretation. In addition, the teacher settles on an interpretation of /kɒn/

and /kɔ/ as a 'comb', rather than the previously entertained possibility of 'cone' or indeed the intended 'corn'.

The final extract below shows an example of failed communication, where the teacher tolerates a communication failure because he believes that the meaning may become clear soon.

Extract #9: The engineers and the inventor work frantically to fix the out-of-control machine. Eventually, they seem to have succeeded. But the machine throws a cream pie in Charlie's face.

NS-SLL interaction	Stimulated recall session
SLL: and thi: the guys they ah try to stop it? and but they can't do it? and . but anyway they final fix it, and put the corn away. NS: mmhm SLL: and . then, last one is #they still got a cake. < . > this time they, they the machine didn't operate properly and just threw cake # <> in his face, [mhm] and	RES: So, what did you understand by that bit? NS: . . . not . a lot . I couldn't quite understand what he said at the end of that RES: Mmm NS: Like, the machine opened [mm] and I wasn't really [rum] quite sure. RES: Ok NS: Yeah, I mean, I guess I wou- I probably should have stopped and asked him what it was but I thought it might be better if: he continued explaining, because from what I noticed that, . . if he'd said something a little bit strange and I didn't quite get it, it would sort of explain itself. in a little bit RES: Uh-huh NS: like he'd he'd explain further on on something and then you'd pick up what he'd actually meant

As it turned out, the teacher had not grasped the point that the learner was making. This was the final link in a chain of strained and miscommunication which started with the teacher's failure to correctly interpret mispronounced words. This led him to paint a rather different picture in his mind. Following the stimulated recall session, he was shown the part of *Modern Times* film that he had missed while 'answering the

phone'. It is only at this stage that he became aware of the extent of misunderstanding.

Discussion between the Researcher and Native Speaker after the stimulated recall session

RES: I'll just pause there. Just a quick comment, it's quite fascinating how one or two mispronounced words can set off a whole [yep] can set off a whole chain reaction of [yep] different interpretation, eh?

NS: Yep, especially at the start with the choking, I didn't even THINK of shaking, I [yeah] really didn't. Because I thought that . I just inferred that he actually was drinking the soup because it's lunch time so he's obviously going to have some soup too

RES: Mmm

NS: But in fact, that wasn't the case [[*laughs*]] quite the opposite

RES: It's quite fascinating

NS: I mean parts of the lunch machine were . quite accurate, but it still didn't . . . paint the picture . that . you know . what it actually was, [yeah] like the picture I got: was something a little bit different. That it was more of a lunch cleaning machine than an actual eating machine. [mmm] and that's why I- I guess I wasn't really sure . how the CAKE sort of . . . fitted into the whole idea

RES: That's it. Any final comments to make?

NS: It's pretty interesting to n- to sort of notice how: much can actually be missed by, like he mispronounced what was it? Ah

RES: Two or three words

Implications

In summary, the first three extracts above reveal that surface-level linguistic errors on the part of the second language learner need not give rise to any miscommunication. However, the extracts which follow show how initial pronunciation slips could give rise to a communicative breakdown to such an extent that the listener (the teacher) came away from the interaction with a completely different interpretation from that which was intended by the learner. It is important to note that the teacher was not aware of this until he watched the part of the film that he had missed.

This study was carried out using recorded extracts from *Modern Times*, and we believe that short extracts from (silent) movies are potentially extremely rich stimuli. However, as will be discussed below, it is possible for language teachers to use other information-gap tasks in a similar way for classroom activities, professional development, and as a focus for action research.

Classroom teaching

The procedure could be used in language classrooms, for example in classes preparing students for the oral element of examinations such as IELTS. Pairs of students could be asked to take part in the two-part interaction, and the recording of the second phase could be played to stimulate class discussion of where communication was sometimes strained, and the reasons for this. The class could be encouraged to consider specific communication strategies to reduce their own faulty production and -perhaps more importantly- to use specific examples of tacitful language to seek clarification where they are not sure of the interlocutor's intended meaning. Raising students' consciousness of, and then providing practice in, these issues is particularly important in test situations, where candidates are prone to the anxiety inherent in all examinations, and where it is not always possible or desirable for the examiner to ask for clarification, even where s/he detects miscommunication.

Professional development through reflectivity

We would suggest that teachers could adapt a procedure such as that outlined above to develop their pragmatic awareness of the ways in which communication breaks down, and how miscommunication could be avoided or repaired. By closely examining transcript data, a teacher could anticipate which particular features of language, for example with learners from similar language backgrounds, might lead to strained or miscommunication. He or she might also be able to reflect on how their own questions, or prompts for discussion, could be more clearly framed to avoid leading learners astray. The teacher could be sensitised to signals (verbal or nonverbal) from their interlocutor which indicate that the conversation is moving away from the desired direction, and learn how to tacitfully bring it effectively back on track. From such a microgenetic analysis of transcript data many useful insights might emerge. However, as this study has shown, the issues could be more fully, and usefully, explored by holding stimulated recall sessions immediately afterwards with participants so that their respective points of view could be discussed and reconciled; in this way possible solutions could be co-constructed, rather than unilaterally considered. It is not suggested that this would be an everyday teaching activity but rather that it could be an element in an individual or group programme of reflective practice.

Research

The study discussed above has not sought to make generalisations about issues related to problematic communication, but rather to open up a particular way for teachers - and perhaps learners - to explore, and reflect on, interaction in specific contexts. We suggest that it could be very useful

for the procedure to be used by groups of teachers in collaborative action research projects, where analyses and interpretations could be constructed. The primary aim of such projects would be to identify communication problems facing their particular students and perhaps find ways that they could assist both themselves and their students to avoid or repair these challenges. Such small-scale and localised projects could stimulate more extensive studies of where, how and why language learners' communication may falter or break down. Moreover, if the data collection and analysis of such research is done systematically, and disseminated through conference presentations and publications, the findings could enhance general professional and academic understanding of the pragmatic use of language.

Note: A transcript of the interaction between the teacher and the second language learner discussed in this article may be obtained from Jono Ryan (jgr3@waikato.ac.nz).

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Appendix Description of the film extract

The second section of the film has two parts. The first part (recounted in the extracts) is described here.

It begins at lunchtime, as the conveyor belt slows to a halt and Charlie and the other workers stop for lunch. Charlie has developed a 'twitch' in which he cannot stop making the repetitive movements from his job on the

production line. The boss's secretary happens to be walking past and as she bends over, Charlie instinctively 'tightens' the buttons at the back of her skirt with the two wrenches or spanners he still has in his hands.

Meanwhile, the man who works beside Charlie pours a bowl of soup and sets it down on the bench. Charlie is about to sit in it when the colleague shouts at him, and tells him to pass it over. When Charlie picks up the soup bowl, he is still twitching and so he spills the soup over the floor and over his colleague.

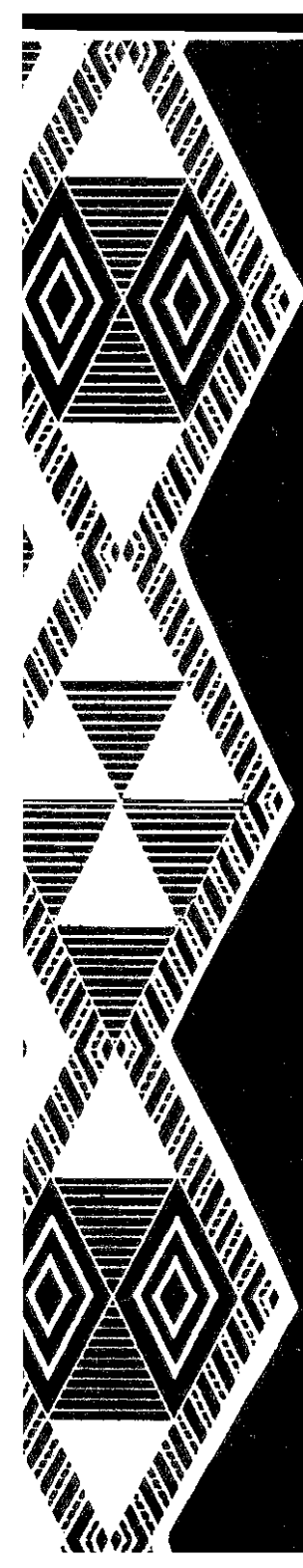
Soon after, the manager arrives on the factory floor with a new machine that an inventor is trying to sell to him, and which they now intend to trial on the workers to judge its performance. It is the dome shaped object that was brought to the manager's office at the end of the first section of the film. The manager chooses Charlie as the guinea pig. The inventor has Charlie strapped in, and explains to Charlie that it is an automatic feeding machine.

The machine begins by raising a plate of food to the level of Charlie's mouth. The plate contains small cubes of food, perhaps bread or meat. A metal rod pushes a piece into Charlie's mouth, the plate rotates a little, and then another piece is pushed into his mouth. Then an object on the end of a rod, perhaps a sponge, swings around and wipes Charlie's face. After this, the machine rotates and a bowl of soup is raised for Charlie to drink from. The machine rotates again and a corn cob appears. The corn has a skewer through its middle, which slowly spins the corn and moves it from left to right so that Charlie can eat without moving. At this stage, the machine is working well.

Suddenly, the machine starts to malfunction. The corn starts spinning faster and faster and violently moving back and forth across his mouth. The machine is out of control. Sparks are flying from the engine and it appears to be short circuiting. The engineers and the inventor work frantically to fix it. Eventually, they seem to have succeeded in repairing it. They try again. But the next dish is a cream pie that the machine 'throws' in Charlie's face. The machine goes wildly out of control again, and the sponge that was meant to wipe Charlie's mouth, instead repeatedly bashes his face. The inventor and his engineer eventually get the machine to stop, and it releases Charlie, who collapses to the ground.

The manager tells the inventor 'it's no good - it isn't practical' and walks away with his assistants, leaving the inventor behind.

REVIEWS



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