DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH INTERACTION STRATEGY TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) has led teachers to try new methods and strategies to improve students' speaking skills. However, students are still unable to play an effective role in group discussions as they lack the necessary vocabulary and interaction strategies. This paper examines how interaction strategy training affects group interaction and task performance. For this purpose ten groups of students were introduced to and trained in the use of selected interaction strategies. The analysis indicated that training resulted in a significant use of interaction strategies, and in more effective interaction between group members.

Introduction

Ever since the introduction of MUET, a proficiency test compulsory for all pre-university student intending to further their studies at public universities, English language teachers have been trying new approaches and strategies to improve the competence of students in the various skills. Among the components tested in MUET is speaking, which primarily tests students on communicative skills, observing social conventions, conveying facts, managing a discussion, seeking and giving information, expressing disagreement, making suggestions and recommendations and others.

There are two parts to the speaking component, an individual presentation (Task A) and group discussion (Task B). Task A requires candidates to convey facts, to explain, express preferences and to make decisions. Task B tests the ability of the candidates to interact and take turns, to negotiate meaning, to manage discussion and to close the discussion. Most of our learners, through observation, are able to communicate their ideas and thoughts fairly well in the individual task (Task A). However, they are not able to participate effectively in group discussion (Task B). It is found that the inability to play an effective part in the group discussion is due not only to a lack of vocabulary but also a lack of effective interaction strategies. In order to play an active role in group discussion, students first of all need to know

how to interact and this requires interactive strategy training.

Literature Review

Interaction phrases which have been regarded as institutionalised expressions (Lewis, 2002), lexical phrases and multi-word items (Ellis, 1997; Moon, 1997; Nation, 2001) have in recent years been given a lot of attention within the language learning field. Much research has been carried out on focused lexical teaching which involves repeated teaching and learning of a word or phrase and the generative use of words in natural settings (Nation, 2001:164; Nation, 2001; Menon & Vijayarajoo, 2003). The literature is also replete with discussions on the effectiveness of strategy training to enhance learning outcomes (Cohen, 1988:66; Bejarano, Levine, Olshtain & Steiner, 1997; Lam & Wong, 2000: 245). Bejarano *et al.* (1997), in their study on the effectiveness of strategy training contend that the negotiation process in a group discussion can be facilitated by training learners in the use of interaction strategies. They found that learners participated more actively and that the quality of participation was improved by the use of appropriate interaction strategies.

According to other research, strategy instruction should focus upon strategies students really need to know, should be authentic and relevant, and should be woven into regular language instruction (Cohen and Weaver 1998). Furthermore, research also indicates that to improve language learning proficiency, strategy instruction should be explicit.

For effective communication, some of the essential interaction skills needed by students are that they should be able to direct the dialogue with one another, comment immediately on what another speaker has just said, disagree with or challenge another speaker's statement, should not have to be invited to speak or speak when there is a short silence indicating the end of someone else's turn, interrupt one another to include an opinion or question, and finally use appropriate paralinguistic features (Counihan, 1998).

Lam & Wong (2000: 245) in a related study, conclude that learners should also exhibit appropriate cooperative behaviour and peer support to compensate for the ineffective use of interaction strategies due to limited language proficiency. Cooperative Language Learning seeks to foster cooperation among learners through structured interaction activities. Advocates of Cooperative Learning define Cooperative Learning as:

> Cooperation is working together to accomplish shared goals. Within cooperation situations, individuals seek outcomes beneficial to themselves and all other group members. (Richards & Rodgers, 2001:195)

Research on successful cooperative learning behaviour skills vary from students knowing and trusting each other, accepting and supporting one another and resolving conflicts constructively (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1990), to taking turns, providing encouragement and active listening (Putnam, 1993), to giving positive feedback and asking for other people's opinions (Rice, 1994). Lam & Wong (2000: 245) contend that without adequate peer support, learners might lack the confidence and motivation to use such interaction strategies effectively.

The Study

The primary aim of the present study was to observe how interaction strategy training might effect the development of oral competence. The study also examined the frequency and the types of interaction strategies used and the effectiveness of interaction strategy use after training. The research questions addressed were:

1   Will an increased range of interaction strategies improve group interaction?
2   How many and what type of interaction strategies taught will be used?
3   What types of strategies are used most effectively?

Methodology

The subjects for the study comprised ten groups of Semester 2 Diploma level students with each group comprising 4 members. Of these, 20 had obtained a grade point of 3.33 and above (B+, A-,A) and the other 20 had a grade point of 3.00 and below (B, B-, C+) in the previous semester's English language proficiency examination. The subjects were assigned to their groups by the researchers to ensure groups were of equal ability. The subjects then received instruction from the same instructor, who is one of the researchers.

Group Activity & Assessment

The groups of students were to take part in group discussions similar to those of the speaking component tested in the MUET. Each group was given a social issue with four choices or alternative solutions to discuss (see Appendix 1 for sample of speaking situations). They were then given 10 minutes to discuss and come to a decision.

The group discussions were observed and recorded twice, once before and once after the training. The transcripts of both these sessions were reviewed and compared to examine if interaction strategy training improved group interaction. Specifically, the group discussions were observed to identify and examine the type of interaction strategies, and the frequency and effectiveness of the interaction strategies which were used before and after the training.

Procedures

Selecting the Interaction Strategies

Based on Bejarano et al's (1997) list of interaction strategies, the MUET speaking component objectives, interviews with lecturers, and observation of past group discussions, the researchers came up with five basic interaction strategies which they felt the students needed most in group discussions. The selected strategies for training were:

1   expressing agreement
2   expressing disagreement
3   seeking clarification
4   clarifying
5   directing interaction within the group.

The strategies above were related to the needs and characteristics of the learners. Each of the strategies was transferable to other language situations and was considered easy to learn (Oxford, 1990).

Developing the Training Lessons

The strategies were introduced and taught in 4 lessons (2 hour lessons) which were based partly on Oxford's (1990) cognitive and social strategies for learning a new language and on Nation's (2001) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies (see Appendix 2 for lesson plans). The lessons were planned based on the strategies for practicing under the cognitive strategies (Oxford, 1990) such as repetition, formally practicing with sounds, recombining or generative use of words in different contexts and practicing naturalistically (Oxford, 1990 & Nation, 2001).

Students were also taught the social strategies suggested by Oxford (1990) and the cooperative learning strategies suggested by Johnson et al (1990) and Rice (1994), such as prompting and providing a word or phrase to help out another student, cooperating with others and being sympathetic to others.

Results and Findings

Pre-Training Group Interaction

In the pre-training recordings (see Appendix 3 for sample extract of group 3 discussions), students did not have much genuine interaction with one another. Most of the ideas or suggestions were not discussed thoroughly (as seen in the Pre-Training sample extract), most probably due to the fact that the students lacked the vocabulary

to express themselves. There was not much discussion between members or justification of points, apart from turn-taking responses, agreement and disagreement (see Table 1).

Table 1: Pre-training: frequency of strategy use

Grp	Peer	Agree	Disagree	Direct Interaction	Seek Clarification	Clarify
1	1	3	6	4		
2	2	4	4	3	1	
3	1	2	4	3		
4		5	5	2	1	
5	3	7	3	3		
6	2	3	6	1		
7	2	2	4	2	1	
8		1	4			
9	2	3	3	3		
10	2	4	6	2		
Total	15	34	45	23	3	

Peer Support and Cooperative Learning Behaviour

There was not much peer support or cooperative learning behaviour displayed (15 instances) as illustrated in the examples below (Appendix 3, lines 17 & 20-23).

<C> … because they always what? …'kurang' ah…not enough financial. Always wear old clothes, food always is not good……

<D> Old folk are special. They are parents. They also need more money because …because… ah…and orphanage, people always 'sedekah'? What the word? …ah…

In both the above utterances, no help was given by the other members to provide the correct English language equivalent. This lack of peer support was also prevalent in the other pre-training group discussions.

Frequency and Type of Interaction Strategy Phrases

There were 105 instances of interaction strategy phrases used by all the ten groups but most of them were phrases used to disagree (45), agree (34) and redirect (23) the interaction, for example:

I don't agree	(line 4)	Disagreement
I'm not agree	(lines 3, 6 & 19)	Disagreement
I'm agree	(line 8)	Agreement
How about you?	(line 18)	Redirect Interaction
I don't think so	(lines 16 & 23)	Disagreement

Another popular phrase used was 'What your opinion' (redirect interaction). Instances of seeking clarification and clarifying oneself were rare.

Post-Training Group Interaction

In the post-training recordings (see Appendix 3 for sample extract of group 3 discussion), it was found that group interaction had improved greatly. There were more attempts at seeking clarification and clarifying oneself rather than just agreeing and disagreeing as in the pre-training session (see table 2 & 3). There were more attempts to listen to each other and to clarify (25 instances) and justify (27 instances) points, as illustrated in the examples below (Appendix 3, lines 12-21 & 37-41):

<C> Like what?
<A> Like floods, land slides, fire…
<C> Yah…yah! We have to form groups, young people to help increase financial of the victims …ah… because they have no money, all got lost or burn.
<B> I'm sorry, I don't understand what you mean young people to increase financial?
<C> What I mean is they can helplah to … to collect money, I think.
<B> Oh! Raise fundslah! To buy cloth, food rice. Build their houses again. How about your opinion D?
<B> I'm sorry, but I don't understand. What you mean help out? If the professional are there, how we can help out? We don't have expert.
<A> Yes, I know, but we can be trained first. So, whenever there's a disaster, the volunteers who are trained can help out.

Table 2: Post-training: frequency of strategy use

GRP	CLB	Agree	Disagree	Direct Interaction	Seek Clarification	Clarify
5	7	3	7	5	5	
2	4	7	4	6	3	3
3	4	6	3	5	2	1
4	4	6	5	5	3	3
5	3	5	3	7	4	3
6	4	4	5	6	2	2
7	3	4	6	5	2	2
8	4	6	2	5	1	1
9	5	4	4	5	2	2
10	4	3	3	3	3	3
Total	40	52	38	54	27	25

Table 3: Comparison of pre-training & post-training: frequency of strategy use

Treat	Clb	Agree	Disagree	Direct Interaction	Seek Clarification	Clarify
Pre	15	34	45	23	3	0
Post	40	52	38	54	27	25

Peer Support and Cooperative Learning Behaviour

There was also a great improvement in group or peer cooperative behaviour (an increase of 25 instances), which improved the general interaction between members. There were 40 instances of peer support and cooperative learning behaviour observed, as illustrated in the examples below (Appendix 3, lines 27-29 & 45-48):

    <C> Oh, I see! What about police, ambulance, 'bomba' …ah…fire…
    <A> Fire department! (Helps out by providing the word)
    <C> Ah! Fire department! And all can also help. (uses the word)
    <D> Yes, I'm agree. As I say before, we must collect funds, maybe have funfair or … 'jualan' …ah …
    <B> Sales? (helps out by providing the word)
    <D> Yah!... but sale cloth, old cloth or things. (uses the word but incorrectly)

There were more instances of group members supporting each other by providing the correct word or phrase and even helping to clarify another's suggestion.

Frequency and Type of Strategies

Based on the post-training recordings, the frequency of strategy use increased after the training and there were more types of strategies used after the training. There was a total increase of 121 instances of strategy use in the post-training session in comparison to strategy use in the pre-training session. In the pre-training session, students used a limited set of strategies to direct interaction, agree and disagree. In the post-training session, interaction strategy phrases to direct interaction (54), agree (52), disagree (38) and to seek clarification (27) were retained and were produced frequently, such as:

What do you think?	(line 3)	Direct Interaction
How about your opinion?	(line 21)	Direct Interaction
Do you agree?	(lines 24 & 43)	Direct Interaction
Like what?	(line 12)	Seeking Clarification
I'm sorry I don't understand.	(lines 17, 25 & 37)	Seeking Clarification
What you mean?	(line 30)	Seeking Clarification
What I meant was/is…	(lines 19 & 31)	Clarifying
Yes, I agree with you.	(line 33)	Agreement
Yes, I'm agree.	(line 45)	Agreement
Yes, I know.	(line 40)	Agreement & Clarifying
That's a good suggestion/idea!	(lines 42 & 49)	Agreement

Other interaction strategy phrases which were taught and produced often by students to seek clarification were: 'Do you mean that…' and 'Sorry, could you repeat that?; to agree was, 'Your suggestion sounds good' and to disagree was, 'I'm sorry, but I don't agree' and 'I don't think so'. The increased frequency of interaction strategy phrases and the variety of strategies used were evidence of an advancement in strategy use which resulted in improved group interaction.

Errors

However, many of the interaction strategy phrases had some grammatical errors, such as:

I'm agree	instead of	I agree
What you think?	instead of	What do you think?
How about your opinion?	instead of	How about you?
What your opinion?	instead of	What is your opinion?
What you mean?	instead of	What do you mean?

Most of these errors were fossilized grammatical errors involving auxiliary verbs and a lack of form-meaning knowledge (Baddeley, 1990 in Nation 2001:148). This is an area of difficulty for students due to L1 interference and more meaningful encounters over a longer period of time would be needed to overcome these errors.

Effectiveness

The results of the present study have indicated that group interaction improved with frequent use of the interaction strategies. There were many instances of effective use of some of the interaction strategies such as those for agreement, disagreement and directing the interaction. However, interaction strategies for seeking clarification and clarifying had fewer instances of effective use, as in the following extracts (Appendix 3, lines 7-19 & 29-32):

    <B> I'm sorry, I don't understand what you mean young people to increase financial?
    <C> What I mean is they can helplah to…to collect money, I think.
    and
    <C> Ah…fire department! And all can also help.
    <B> What you mean all can also help?
    <C> What I meant was that the fire department, police can help together.

In the above extracts, we find that C could not clarify or justify her points. She could only repeat her statement mainly because of C's limited vocabulary. She tried to clarify her point but in the end had to repeat herself as she lacked the vocabulary. This was observed in all of the students with limited language proficiency. In comparison, we found that clarification was easier if that particular student was more proficient in the language.

We also found that the effective use of interaction strategies was also affected by the degree of cooperative learning employed by the group members (Lam & Wong, 200: 245-255). Even though cooperative learning behaviour or peer support had improved in all of the group discussions, most of them were in the form of one

word or one phrase (Appendix 3, lines 6, 28, 47 & 49). There was less peer support observed whenever a group member was trying to clarify himself, as seen in the extract below (Appendix 3, lines 22-26):

> <D> …Like A say, have volunteer group…collect money or get sponsor like big companies or corporate people. Do you agree C?
> <C> I'm sorry, what you mean corporate people?
> <D> We can get money from the big companies …ah…that is corporate.

In the above extract, D could not explain corporate people adequately and in fact paused for assistance. However, there was not enough support from his group members and therefore he had to end up by repeating his earlier statement which resulted in ineffective use of the strategy. This again we felt was due to the low proficiency of the other group members. There was clearly a lack of confidence among them to be able to help out their group members.

However, there were a few instances of peer support during clarification of a point, which improved the effectiveness of the clarification strategy as seen in the extract below (Appendix 3, lines 19-21 & 29-34):

> <C> What I mean is they can helplah to…to…collect money, I think.
> <B> Oh! Raise fundslah. To buy cloth, food, rice. Build their houses…
>   &
> <B> What you mean all can also help?
> <C> What I meant was that the fire department, police can help together.
> <A> Yes, I agree with you. All of these people must help…

In the first extract, B helped C out by not only providing the correct term but also providing examples. In the second extract A, helps out C by not only agreeing with him but also explaining further. Cooperative learning and peer support improved not only the group interaction but also the use of interaction strategies.

Conclusions and Implications for Teaching

To conclude, the main findings of this study are that: (1) training or explicit instruction in interaction strategies improves group interaction, (2) training resulted in more frequent and varied use of interaction strategies, (3) a limited range of vocabulary or limited language proficiency of the students affected the effective use of interaction strategies and (4) cooperative learning and peer support can be used to motivate

limited language proficiency students to contribute more to the general group interaction.

From the above results, we recommend that interaction strategies be taught to learners together with instruction of essential vocabulary (Lam & Wong, 2000:245, Menon & Vijayarajoo, 2003), as effective use of these strategies requires a certain threshold of language proficiency. The students would have more confidence to use the more difficult interaction strategies such as clarification if they had adequate language support.

We also recommend that effective strategy training include cooperative learning and peer support so that the students are encouraged not only to clarify themselves but also to contribute more to the discussion.

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Appendix 1: Speaking Situations

Pre-Training Situation

The Counselling Club recently managed to raise funds of about RM 3,000 for charity through the activities held during UiTM's Open Day. As a committee member of the club you are required to suggest ways on how to use the money wisely. Discuss which one of the following will benefit most from the funds raised.
(a) an Old Folks' Home
(b) a fund for victims of war
(c) an orphanage
(d) the Children's Ward at the General Hospital

Post-Training Situation

You are a member of the local community council. The council is talking about natural disasters and mishaps.

In your group, suggest some ways on how individuals and local authorities can help victims of natural disasters.

Appendix 2: Interaction Strategy Training

The objective is to raise students' awareness of the importance of interaction strategies.

1. Lesson 1: Teaching and providing practice on agreement and disagreement. Teaching cooperative learning and peer support.

2. Lesson 2: Reinforcing Lesson 1. Teaching and providing practice on clarifying oneself and seeking clarification.

3. Lesson 3: Reinforcing Lessons 1 &2. Teaching and providing practice on directing interaction.

4. Lesson 4: Revising, practicing and consolidating all the five interaction strategies and cooperative learning behaviour.

Lesson 1
Introduce the phrases below to the students. Brainstorm for other phrase they have used or come across. Explain phrases to students, request students to write them out and say it out loud in the correct intonation. Explain cooperative learning and peer support. Provide examples.

Agreeing
1   I agree with you.
2   Yes, that's a good idea.
3   Alright, I accept your suggestion.
4   Your suggestion sounds good.
5   You're right.

Disagreeing
1   I'm sorry, but I don't agree with that.
2   I'm sorry, I don't think that'll work.
3   No, I'm afraid I don't see it your way.
4   No, I cannot accept that.

5 I beg to differ.
6 I think it would be better if we tried something different.

Student Practice
1 Work in groups of four.
2 Take 20 minutes to prepare for the topic below:
   'What facility does UiTM Melaka need to upgrade the most?'
3 Discuss the topic. Your group should try to reach a decision about the facility that needs to be upgraded the most. During the discussion, each of you should practice agreeing and disagreeing. Empathize with each other and try to lend support to your group members by providing the correct word or phrase.

Lesson 2
Introduce the phrases below to the students. Brainstorm for other phrase they have used or come across. Explain phrases to students, request students to write them out and say it out loud in the correct intonation. Emphasize the importance of peer support and cooperative behaviour.

Seeking Clarification:
1 Do you mean that …
2 So, you're saying that…
3 You think that …
4 Sorry, but I don't quite understand.
5 Sorry, could you repeat that please?
6 Sorry, could you say that again, please?

Clarifying Oneself:
1 What I said was …
2 What I meant was …
3 Let me repeat that.
4 Let me explain once again.

Student Practice
1 Work in pairs.
2 Each of you work on a short presentation on either a game, cooking, dressing,

decorating, etc.
3   In 10 minutes, make brief notes on what to present.
4   Take turns to present. While listening, interrupt and ask questions to seek clarification. Use the phrases introduced by your lecturer. Your partner should then clarify him/herself. Empathize with each other and try to lend support to your group members by providing the correct word or phrase and by helping to justify each other's points.

Lesson 3

Introduce the phrases below to the students. Brainstorm for other phrase they have used or come across. Explain phrases to students, request students to write them out and say it out loud in the correct intonation. Emphasize the importance of peer support and cooperative behaviour.

Directing Interaction
1   What about you?
2   What do you think?
3   What is your opinion on this matter?
4   How about you?
5   Do you agree to that?

Student Practice
1   Work in groups of four.
2   Take 20 minutes to prepare for the topic below:
    'What is the most effective study method?'
3   Discuss the topic. Your group should try to reach a decision about the most effective study method. During the discussion, each of you should practice agreeing and disagreeing, seeking clarification, clarifying and directing interaction. Empathize with each other and try to lend support to your group members by providing the correct word or phrase and by helping to justify each other's points.

Lesson 4
Go through quickly all the phrases introduced in previous lessons.

Student Practice

1   Work in the same groups.
2   Take 20 minutes to prepare the topic below:
    'You have just won RM100,000. You have decided to donate the money to one charity.'
3   Discuss the above topic and come to a consensus which charity is the most deserving. Make sure you practice all the interaction strategies you have learnt and cooperative learning behaviour.

Appendix 3:   Sample Extract of Group 3 Discussion

Pre-Training Recording

<A>   So, which charity should we give the money to? How about
      the children's ward? The children are sick and lonely, so we can
      give them the money to let them enjoy.   Line   1
<B>   **I don't agree**. I think … em … orphanage because …because…
      they have no one, no money. So give themlah!   Line   5
<D>   **No, I'm not agree**. I think old folks Home more better. Ah…
      they old people, have no one caring them.
<C>   **I'm agree.** Old people, people always forget. There not many
      money for them. But also …ah… how about fund for victims
      of war? They also need money.   Line   10
<A>   Yes, but I think it still should be given to the Children's Ward.
      We only have RM3,000 which isn't much, so it's much better if
      we give it to the children to enjoy.
<D>   How about old people? They have no money also. They are so
      lonely, you know. Can buy many thing for them.   Line   15
<C>   Uh… **I don't think so**. I now feel orphanage, because they
      always what? … 'kurang' ah …not enough financial. Always
      wear old clothes, food always is not good. So, **how about you B**?
<B>   **I'm not agree with you**. Ah…ah…**What you think?**
<D>   Old folk are special. They are parents. They also need more   Line   20
      money because…because…ah… and orphanage, people always
      'sedekah'? What that word? …ah…
<C>   **I don't think so**! I see so many orphanage no money.

<A>   Yes, but the charity that most needs it is the Children's Ward.   Line 24

Post Training Recording

<A>   Natural disasters are terrible but with all of us and the   Line 1
           authorities to help, it would help the victims. So, what can we
           do? **What do you think B?**

<B>   I think can have 'gotong-royong' to help to clean up … *like*
           after water… ah… rain heavy…ah….   Line 5

<A>   *After the floods, you mean?*

<B>   Ah…yes…yes! People can bring food, clothes to help the
           'kampung' people.

<A>   Yes, we could also have a volunteers group to help people.
           The volunteers would go around helping the victims, helping to Line 10
           raise funds. There are lots of natural disasters, you know…

<C>   **Like what?**

<A>   **Like floods, land slides, fire…**

<C>   Yah…yah! We have to form groups, young people to help
           increase financial of the victims …ah… because they have no Line 15
           money, all got lost or burn.

<B>   **I'm sorry, I don't understand what you mean** young people to
           increase financial?

<C>   **What I mean is they can helplah to … to collect money**, I think.

<B>   Oh! Raise fundslah! To buy cloth, food rice. Build their houses Line 20
           again. **How about your opinion D?**

<D>   We can get people to give money. Like A say, have volunteer
           group to collect money or get sponsor like big companies or
           corporate people. **Do you agree C?**

<C>   **I'm sorry, what you mean corporate people?**   Line 25

<D>   We can get money from the big companies…ah… that is corporate.

<C>   Oh, I see! What about police, ambulance, *'bomba' …ah…fire…*

<A>   *Fire department!*

<C>   Ah! Fire department! And all can also help.

<B>   **What you mean all can also help?**   Line 30

<C>   **What, I meant was** that the fire department, police can help
           together.

<A>   **<u>Yes, I agree with you</u>**. All of these people must help. But we
       ordinary people must help them also. Maybe, the volunteer
       group that we form can be trained to help them. Like when   Line 35
       there are too many victims we volunteers can help out.

<B>   **<u>I'm sorry, but I don't understand</u>**. What you mean help out.
       If the professional are there, how we can help out? We don't
       have expert.

<A>   **<u>Yes, I know, but we can be trained first</u>**. So, whenever there's Line 40
       a disaster, the volunteers who are trained can help out.

<C>   **<u>Yes, that's a good suggestion</u>**. I also think we should collect
       funds …ah… because money is so important. **<u>Do you agree
       or not D?</u>**

<D>   **<u>Yes, I'm agree</u>**. As I say before, we must collect funds, maybe Line 45
       have funfair or…or 'jualan' …ah…

<B>   *Sales?*

<D>   Yah! …but sale cloth, old cloth or things.

<A>   *Jumble sales?* **<u>That's a good idea!</u>**   Line 49