

Linguistic Skills and the Cultural Make-Up of the ESL Learners of University of Eastern Philippines

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Abstract

This qualitative study focused on how conversations in English were carried out among NinorteSamaron (NS) speakers. Using Conversation Analysis (CA), anchored on Austin and Searle Speech Acts Theory and Grice Conversation Maxims, this study described NS conversations-- the speech acts and the maxims of cooperative principle produced. The participants were NinorteSamaron freshmen in the University of Eastern Philippines. The data were composed of 75 transcribed conversations generated via task-based conversation prompts. The findings revealed that NS speakers' performed speech acts in specific contexts yet inadequate to sustain communicative needs. Grice' Cooperative Principles were observed but on a limited scale. Violations to conversation maxims were likewise evident. As regards conversation structure, although it was found to be universal, the conversations in ESL contexts largely progressed through question-pair strategy attributed to poor linguistic and strategic competence which tended to abruptly terminate the interaction. The NS conversations were characterized by peculiar features like code switching and code-mixing and other expressions flavored by Filipino culture. It is concluded that the linguistic skills and the cultural make-up of the ESL learners, account for oral communication materials design. A major recommendation is to create authentic language learning strategies that promote conversation skills practice.

Keywords: task-based instruction, negotiated interaction, conversations, speech acts, oral communication, English as a Second Language

I. INTRODUCTION

The shift from language as a code or system to language use and function challenges a new trend in research along discourse perspective. In the case for instance of face-to-face communication, any word uttered in whatever manner constitutes an action which use and meaning are largely shaped by context. In other words, utterances though taken in similar form but embedded in different force bring forth a new shade of meaning. Failure to capture its meaning in essence of use results in conversation breakdown. Every utterance in a conversation is understood as a sequential pattern of interaction between and among speakers and listeners.

The nature of communication in spoken discourse context seemed too complex and crucial, even more complicated is the case of conversation, it being characterized by an impromptu exchange of talk that is fully interactive between participants of at least two people exchanging messages in real time basis (Norrick, 1991). A social interactive environment that allows individuals to engage in a series of information exchanges can be a favorable setting. In the case of the University of Eastern Philippines (UEP), a state university in Northern Samar, it could be observed that during discussions the majority of ESL learners only listened to teachers and had less or virtually no interaction with other learners. This does not do well for proficiency in oral communication. In effect, ESL teachers

oftentimes have noticed that language skill learning becomes fragmented and students continuously commit the same oral communication problems over and over. It is as if what they have been doing has contributed less or worst did nothing to improve the learners' spoken fluency and communication strategies particularly along conversational structures and the use of form and meaning in conversation.

The analysis of spoken discourse, its use, form and function, is essential as it draws impact on the practical application in the teaching of conversation and oral communication. In an attempt to determine NS language learners' spoken discourse ability, this study explored and analyzed how they carried out conversations in English. In the absence of naturally occurring conversations in English, negotiated interaction was designed to draw out conversation episodes via task-based communicative tasks. Negotiated interaction is—the modification or restructuring of interaction that occurs when learners and their interlocutors perceive and experience difficulty in message comprehensibility (Pica, 1994). Speakers in a conversation negotiate meaning. In the case of conversation, this negotiation will lead to the provision of either direct or indirect forms of feed-back, including corrections, comprehension checks, clarification requests, topic shifts, repetition and recasts (Carroll, 2000). Pica (Brown, 1993) supports that engaging in the kind of interaction to activate acquisition process, classroom activities must be structured to provide a context whereby learners not only talk to their interlocutors, but negotiate meaning with them as well.

II. OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to describe and analyze oral communication discourse particularly conversation, as it is viewed to be much more complex and subtle than most language teachers often assume compared with other language skills. Specifically, its objectives were to:

1. determine the speech acts produced in the NS conversations in ESL as to

commissives, directives, representatives and declaratives;

2. find out what Maxims of Cooperative Principle are commonly present in the NS conversations in ESL in terms of quality, quantity, relation and manner; and
3. describe the NS conversation structure ESL according to opening, turn-taking and closing.

III. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study on how conversations were carried out in English among Ninorte Samaron speakers. Grounding on Austin and Searle Speech Acts Theory and Grice Conversation Maxims using conversational analysis (CA) approach, it explored and analyzed subjects' utterances, sequences, the organization of such sequences in their conversation structures and strategies. The research participants were Ninorte Samaron freshman students in the University of Eastern Philippines, the first state university in the Visayas, located at about 3.3 kilometers from Catarman- the capital town of Northern Samar of Region VIII.

The data of the study consisted of seventy-five (75) transcripts of audio-recorded task-based conversations in ESL negotiated interaction gathered from sixteen (16) English 111 classes consisting of students belonging to a wide range of English proficiency from low to average to high which class size ranged from 40-45. These transcribed conversations were elicited using conversation prompts, consisting of communicative tasks designed to direct and motivate students to engage in oral interaction that trigger conversations among the participants. In addition, these communicative tasks were formulated showing a clear resemblance to situations that occur outside classroom contexts to provide the participants an authentic conversation setting.

The speech acts analysis was guided by the—Speech Acts Theory (Austin, 1962 and Searle, 1967). As regards analysis of

conversation cooperative principle, it adopted Grice Cooperative Principle Theory (1976) which describes behavior in conversation in terms of four maxims: quantity, quality, relation and manner. Conversation structure and strategies were analyzed by closely looking into the patterns of conversations and how these were sustained among participants.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Speech Acts Produced in the NS Conversations in English as a Second English (ESL)

Following Austin and Searle's categorization four of these speech acts also appeared in the conversations in the NS ESL context in UEP. Directives, representatives, and expressive were found to be dominantly used, commissive were least used; whereas declaratives were found not in use. The NS ESL speakers' conversations were mostly carried via asking-giving information speech acts.

Of these categories, directives appeared to be the most frequently used. Directives included these speech acts: suggesting or; requesting for help; commanding, asking for information; soliciting comment or reaction; seeking permission or suggestion; asking for confirmation and clarification; requesting or initiating a topic change. Expressive; these speech acts were used in ex-pressing gratitude or thanks; expressing displeasure; expressing concern or support; expressing doubts; sympathizing; admiring or appreciating; complementing; expressing feeling of surprise; apologizing with; greeting; congratulating; parting or leave-taking; disapproving or rejecting a re-quest with and objecting an opinion. Representatives were also found in the conversation in ESL negotiated interaction. Of the several instances belonging to this category, giving information was found dominant; the rest include explaining; narrating events; stating an opinion; stating a comment; giving reaction another; revealing a secret; and relaying messages. Commissives were the least frequently used among the categories. These speech acts include promising or giving assurance; granting a request; accepting

invitation; offering help; and accepting apologies.

The results indicated that similar speech acts which appeared in English conversations as pointed out in CA framework also appeared in the conversations in the NS ESL context. It could be inferred that NS conversations in English per-formed speech acts in specific contexts yet on a limited scale.

In terms of Austin and Searle's theory of —Speech Acts Analysisl comprising three acts – locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary, the NS conversations indicated performatives. A few utterances from the transcribed data were analyzed as shown below:

Austin and Searle's claim that —by making an utterance, the language user performs one or more social actsl applies to NS utterances in ESL conversations. Take for instance, this conversation extract 12, line 1:

A: Can I ask for a cup of coffee?

The utterance is a question, yet it also functions as an indirect request. The hearer may opt to answer the question instead of indirectly responding to a request, though on the other hand, the speaker's illocutionary force is to request rather than plainly ask as to the ability of the hearer to do the act. Another example is observed in extract 47 lines 48-49:

D: Shall we talk to the other place? (supposedly in other place)

A: —Aren't you comfortable here?

The utterance is in the interrogative form but it carries as well another social act. It has an illocutionary force of an indirect suggestion —*Let's look for another place*” rather than merely asking whether the other interlocutors want to move to another place. Thus, line 49 of the same conversation extract, speaker A replied —Aren't you comfortable here? recognizing speaker D was suggesting to move to another place.

The preceding sample analysis of speech acts indicated that NS ESL speakers perform one or more social acts in an utterance as in the case of

indirect speech acts. This concretizes that in the ESL communicative context, —language does not just produce utterances but they act upon and with others by means of speech, and each utterance is a speech act realizing its communicative intention (Tayao, 1998). It further establishes the proposition that the interpretation of meaning is shaped by context —meaning does not reside in the words per se but in the context of the situation —(Malinowski in Tayao 1998).

Grice' Maxims of Cooperative Principle in the NS Conversations in English as a Second Language (ESL)

Grice maxims of cooperative principle: quantity, quality, relation and manner were present in the NS ESL conversations. The majority, more than half of the total was found to exhibit the maxim of quantity which took the form of answers or responses to questions. It appeared that conversations in NS ESL context largely progressed via question and answer strategy. The maxim of relation ranked second of the most commonly used. Relevance of the first to the second contribution was mostly done through the use of reference and cohesive device, but was limited to the use of. Maxim of manner ranked third and the maxim of quality was least frequently used. The data further revealed that NS ESL speaker practiced some alternative strategies to sustain cooperative principle in conversation. Whenever the maxims were broken, they flouted a maxim, clashed with a maxim or opted out a maxim. In clashing with a maxim, hedging was found commonly used. Conversations among NS ESL speakers also indicated the use of conversation implicatures.

Violations resulting in frequent topic changes due to lack of knowledge, vague statements characterized by micro pauses, excessive pauses and gaps which impeded comprehension of the topic content tended to terminate abruptly the conversation. The maxim of quantity which totaled 86 or 63.23 percent was found to be dominantly used compared with the other maxims. These were observed to be in the form

of answer or responses [required] to the questions and requests being asked in the context of interaction as shown in the following sample extracts:

Extract 19 lines 2-3:

B: How are you? What are your plans this coming Christmas?

A: I'm fine I plan this Christmas to prepare (.) ah (.) gift for my friend.

Extract 8 lines 2-3:

B: What's that?

A: I see my crush last Friday. Yeah, and he asked for my number. I just gig-gled.

Extract 23 lines 3-4:

A: Me too, do you have (.) what course you taken this year?

B: My cousin, BS Criminology.

In the preceding examples, it could be observed that the contribution provided information to sustain the on-going conversation, they being answers to questions raised by the interact-ants involved. On the maxim of relation or relevance, 25 or 18.38 percent were found belonging to this category. In most instances, the relevance or relation of a contribution is determined either by means of the use of reference or the use of the transitional word/s taken as a cohesive device. Take the following examples:

On the use of reference:

Extract 14 lines 3-4:

A: Oh, let's talk about Jollibee.

B: Delicious, especially the French fries (laughing)

In this case, delicious and French fries are terms associated with Jollibee. Specifically, French fries function as reference, it being popular to Jollibee's customers. The contribution therefore is relevant.

Extract 50 lines 2-3:

B: We want to watch the movie – Lastikman.

C: Yeah, because that movie is pantastic and fun, let's go.

Line 3, C's contribution is relevant to B's line. It talks about an anaphoric reference - movie. The contribution adds information to the topic discussed.

On the use of transitional or a cohesive device:

Extract 36 lines 1-2:

A: Leslie, it seems our professor is not going to come here.

B: Since our professor didn't come. What are we going to do?

Here, B's utterance or contribution is relevant to A, it being connected by a cohesive de-vice - since in a clause —since our professor didn't comell. The contribution suggests what they are supposed to do next.

There is also the use of conversation implicatures in this:

Extract 23 lines 4-5:

B: My cousin, BS Criminology.

A: Ahh (.) see, you have a practicum subject?

A's question seeks confirmation implying college courses have practicum subjects. Relative to the maxim of manner, all observations cited here are those that conform to Grice's analysis guide —clear and brief. Only 15 lines or 11.02 percent fell under the category. Most of the contributions cannot be classified due to their lengthy and wordy sentences. A few examples are shown as follows:

(15 line 8) C: Oh my God, how sad: But it's okay I have still money and I can lend you.

(27 line 3) C: My professor is not coming late. He is a nice teacher. Hey, do you watch TV news about Trillanes?

(41 line 10) B: Okay. Just buy your needs.

(73 line 10) D: You look like "artista" men:

(34 line 4) A: Oh: my god, it's very important.

As regards the maxim of quality, only about 10 or 7.35 percent was found in use. More often it was the speakers themselves who knew whether the contribution made was either true or false. It was the speaker's option. Thus, to settle whether the contribution was based on truth, the contribution had to be factual or there was a basis for its truth as evidenced in the context at hand.

It could be inferred from the findings that the most commonly applied maxim was the maxim of quantity. It indicated that conversations in ESL context progressed by and large via question-answer pair strategy. These implies that NS ESL learners have not yet mastered other conversation topic development strategies though they appeared in NS UEP ESL context but were found limited.

NS Speakers Conversation Structure and Strategies in English as a Second Language (ESL)

The study showed that the structure of face-to-face conversation discourse followed this universal rule, - that conversation involves a series of moves, turn goal strategies operating on rules and the ways in which the interactants prevent and repair errors in talk (Haggerty n.d.) has also been found true to NS ESL communicative context.

NS conversation' openings are largely characterized by adjacency pairs usually a greeting-greeting pair. Others took the form of question-answer pair, request grant, summon answer, request-reject/deny, a combined greeting and re-quest for information with greeting and grant. There were also openings through topic positioning or nomination. One unique feature of NS opening was the organization of linear structure characterized by inserted sequences or embedding's in cases of request. This reflects the indirectness of the Filipinos in terms of asking favors.

Similar turn taking signals that native speakers of English adopt were also observed among NS ESL speakers. NS speakers when interacting in English relinquished turns in these ways: adjacency pairs, selection technique, under

syntax - completion of a grammatical clause, pause lengths, paralanguage, sociocentric markers and intonation contour. However, even if these cues and strategies appeared, adjacency pairs - usually in a question-answer pair strategy, dominated the NS ESL turn taking.

Another noticeable finding is that selection technique was commonly done through the use of —How about you? as a turn signal. It was seen as the only means for NS ESL speakers to ensure a response so that overlaps or gaps were avoided. Also a unique finding in taking turns was the use of “*actually*” as a sociocentric marker though at times the context did not require its use. Interrupting was evident in NS ESL conversation. The findings showed that similar patterns as those which appear in English conversations were also present, such as the use of interrupters, attention getters, phrases or statements. Yet one noticeable finding was that in terms of interrupters and attention getters only “*by the way*” and “*hey*” were found in use. When inter-acting in English conversation, NS ESL speakers did initiate repair, but there were only few repair strategies found in use. Other strategies did not appear.

As regards closings, NS speakers made use of closing strategies such as positive face-saving strategies, combined positive and negative face and solidarity strategies. However, there were strategies found not in use such as the blame, the summary, the use of proverbial aphorisms. Evident among NinorteSamarnon conversation structure was their simple short sentences usually of coordinated short statements. On one hand, there were evidence too that point to the lack of conversation skills as indicated in their use of complete, lengthy, and ambiguous sentences which were characterized by micro pauses and excessive gaps disrupting the flow of conversation.

Another relevant incidental finding was featured in the NS ESL conversations characterized by: the use of code mixing, and code switching either from English to Filipino, or Filipino to English, or English to NS; the use of Filipino particles such as *na*, *ba*, *pala*, and *nga*; the use of expressions like *kuwan*, *ano*,

and *cheng*; the use of sequences characterized by Filipino flavor and the use of excessive elaboration reflecting Filipinos indirectness in asking favors or request as shown below:

Other Observed Features in NS Speakers’ Conversations in ESL

Features	Conversation Extracts
a. The use of code English with Filipino	A: sure, sure next week. Okay. Next week, babayrankorin at thanks for everything. A: can you:: can you go with me (.) because hindi komakakauwiKsiwalakong kasama.
	C: I don’t know konmaatendpa, yon? A: I want to buy a project because (.) my money (.) naubusanak.
b.The use of code mixing Filipino to English English to Filipino	B: (laughing) hindi, kasipokusakosaakingpag-aaral. My parents are strict.
	B: Because (.) the because ahh so important. Siguroyong professor natin may importantengpinuntahan.
c.The use particles such as na, nga, ba, pala.	B: Yeah. They’re hit <u>na</u> hit
	B: No, I tell you (.) I was not feelings well nga.
	A: So: ganoonpala (laughing)
	B: Any national issue about our Philippines or we’re having naba:
d. The use of “ano”, known and “cheng” as expression	A: Ahh, I have a classes today and I go to the library for my ano (.) ny assignment. Okay. Bye.
	A: In kuwan, Salon de Mnila.
	C: Oh. Look around. Enjoy your life para makalimotanmosiya (laughing) cheng (.) .
e. The use of Sequences Characterized by Filipino Flavor	D: So, tell me about the past (.) the things that happened. It’s too long, that we haven’t been together. B: Still the same:

f. The Use of Excessive Elaborations	<p>A: I have a problem. My parents failed to send my allowance this week. I have no money (.) I don't have any money to buy for my foods.</p> <p>B: I have no money but I'm afraid I can't help you. If I lend you my money, I might have some problem as you're experiencing. How about you?</p>
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V. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that the NinorteSamarnon ESL speakers have acquired the language for performing actions in specific contexts but were inadequate to sustain communicative needs. This implies that the NS ESL learners have not yet mastered the form and function of the language. They can express only a limited range of functions and strategies. As to Grice's maxims of cooperative principle, although these were found present in ESL task-based conversations there seemed a drawback along conversation exchanges and contributions attributed to lack of skills in discourse and cohesive markers. This suggests that NS ESL learners despite the extended years in school have limited grammatical repertoire particularly on the use of transitional and cohesive device necessary for a coherent communication. It further implies that they have a limited repertoire of conversation strategies.

Along conversation structure and strategies, it appeared that the structure of face-to-face conversation follows a universal rule. Strategies applied to conversation openings, turn-taking system and closings were similar as those framed in the target language. Yet, difficulties in sustaining conversations surfaced which were indications of poor linguistic and grammatical competence much more along spoken norms such as the occurrence of complete lengthy and wordy sentences characterized by micro pauses and excessive gaps. This implies that the NS ESL speakers have still inadequate linguistic skills in conversation, particularly along syntactic levels. This further implies that NS ESL speakers have acquired limited grammatical features in the

target language which errors impede conversation flow.

The findings of the study also pointed out some peculiar features flavoring the ESL conversations of NS speakers. This implies a carry-over effect of bilingualism as well as effects of mass media. The case of the occurring expressions such as "*cheng*" and other Filipino particles maybe attributed as effects of the rapid evolution of "*gay jargon*". These are seen to have adverse effects towards the goal of achieving successful conversations in the target language. Relative to the findings on the use of sequences characterizing Filipino flavor such as also the use of excessive elaborations in the case of requests and disagreements, apologizing speech acts conventions, this should be reckoned as flavoring English with Philippine taste. Overall, it is therefore concluded that the linguistic skills and the cultural make-up of the ESL learners account for oral communication materials design.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings and conclusions of this study led to the following recommendations:

Since, language is basically for communication of speech acts; speech acts conventions must be emphasized. There is a need for ESL teachers to put emphasis on teaching both form and function of the language. As reflected NS ESL speaker's conversations are achieved by question-answer pair strategy. Language teachers should create authentic learning activities focused on the development of linguistic and discourse competence. Likewise, the ESL teachers should be encouraged and involved in producing language teaching materials geared towards communicative competence development that cater to the oral communication skill demands of NS ESL learners like conversation strategies via task-based activities to include all conversation techniques which teachers rarely used. Moreover, authentic conversations of native speakers such as those observed in CNN, BBC, or FOX interviews so as to provide good models or other related strategies should be a

component of the instructional materials for teaching oral communication and as regards the occurrences of conversation features peculiar to Filipino or NS ESL speakers, there is a need to teach avoidance of code mixing or switching. Language teachers should create learning strategies which will promote more of the conventions of conversation in English and should impose the use of the target language in language classrooms.

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