

# Check It Before You Wreck It

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## ABSTRACT

Communication breakdowns are inevitable in sociolinguistic interactions, in either first (L1) or second (L2) languages. One would expect that such breakdowns lead to some form of meaning negotiation between speakers. However, many students often ignore such breakdowns. The following paper presents and examines the effectiveness of an activity designed to encourage students to check their understanding of each other's ideas and vocabulary. The activity presented puts the students in a situation where misunderstanding is guaranteed, thus forcing students to check that they have been understood, indicate if they have not understood, and seek iterative clarification. The activity encourages the students to approximate their explanations in order to make them as simple as possible for each other to understand. The current paper also suggests some variations on the proposed activity that can be used to suit the needs of particular lessons, as well as reduce L1 use in the classroom.

## INTRODUCTION

The current paper draws on a principle derived from the concept of sociolinguistic competence, and extends the ideas of this line of inquiry by linking communicative competence to linguistic codes. In particular, this paper presents an activity which encourages students to check that they understand each other when there is a communication breakdown. This activity also directs students to make their explanations of miscommunications to one another as simple as possible.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture is generally recognized as playing a key role in second language acquisition (SLA) and communicative competence (Bagaric & Djigunovic, 2007; Celce-Murcia, 2007; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003). Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell (1995) define sociocultural competence as knowledge of the culture of the target language. They suggest, "Sociocultural competence refers to the speaker's knowledge of how to express messages appropriately within the overall social and cultural context of communication, in accordance with the pragmatic factors related to variation in language use." In essence, the authors' view of sociocultural knowledge encompasses a student's knowledge of the "target language community" (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995, pp. 23-24). While cultural knowledge is clearly important in the acquisition of L2, it is not the only cultural variable that affects learning strategies and communicative competence.

Although it recognizes the role of culture, Celce-Murcia et al.'s (1995) conceptualization of sociocultural competence does not take into account competences and strategies which students bring with themselves to the learning environment. Communicative competence is dynamic and is affected by not only L2, but also L1 sociocultural competence (Bagaric & Djigunovic, 2007; Bourdieu, 1991). As such, the current paper aims to extend an understanding of the role of culture in SLA by considering the role of L1 subcultural codes in L2 strategic competence. As Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) point out, sociocultural norms are heavily ingrained in individual identity, making it difficult to change students' attitudes towards their learning. Yet, the language classroom itself also has an academic culture, which may not be congruent with the normative psychology and behaviours which students have acquired within their own subcultural context. In essence, students may already be enculturated with a particular set of linguistic skills and strategies that facilitate or constrain SLA classroom performance. The focus of this paper is on strategies for

supplementing sociolinguistic competence on the principle that enhanced communicative competence is the goal of the language classroom (Bagaric & Djigunovic, 2007; Bourdieu, 1984, 1991; Brown, 2007).

It is reasonable to assume that negotiating meaning is a fundamental aspect of insuring successful communication in any linguistic exchange. L1 speakers routinely check that they understand one another in their own language. Drawing on the implications of Wittgenstein's (1922) logic of ostension, the linguistic competences which students acquire in their own language should be transferable to the strategies they employ when learning a second language. Indeed, checking understanding is a strategic aspect of, for example, Japanese linguistic competence. Japanese students can often be heard making L1 checking slips such as, 'Nanto iu?', 'Nan desu ka?' or 'Mou ichido/ikkai?' However, not all Japanese speakers use their language in the same way (Miller, 2004), and this has implications for how they interact in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. For lower-proficiency classes in particular, some students are more inclined to adopt *avoidance strategies* rather than negotiate meaning. A practical consequence of avoiding communication breakdowns is that such students tend not to check whether they have correctly understood each other (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995). Why are some students less inclined to check that they have been understood? One obvious answer to this is the need to save face. Students may wish not to show their own lack of understanding, or indicate that others have been unclear. Although face-saving likely plays a role in students being reluctant to negotiate meaning, it does not provide a complete explanation of why avoidance strategies are more common in students who find L2 learning more challenging.

Linguistic interactions cannot be understood outside of the context of culture and the social conditions under which they are acquired, produced and received. Language is not just an object of contemplation, but is an underlying system of knowledge which has contextually located instrumental value and which provides social agents with a means to action and power (Bagaric & Djigunovic, 2007; Bourdieu, 1991; Jenkins, 2002). Different contexts of sociolinguistic enculturation mean that social groups tend to employ different kinds of linguistic codes. Littlejohn (2002, p. 178) describes these codes as the "organizing principles behind the language employed by members of a social group." In sum, different groups of students are inclined to engage different kinds of strategies during linguistic interactions (Bagaric & Djigunovic, 2007).

In the context of linguistic codes, one explanation for the reluctance of particularly lower-proficiency students to check understanding comes from the work of Bernstein (2003), whose research suggests that L1 linguistic competence inclines people to utilize language in quite distinct ways, depending on the circumstance of the linguistic exchange. This stems from the way they are enculturated to exploit their own language in social settings that demand specific sociolinguistic codes. Bernstein's (2003) findings indicate some students perform better in aspects of the scholastic system that demand formalized language use, because the language used in these contexts more closely matches the way in which it is used in their primary socializing context - specifically their family setting. Linguistic competence has a determinant effect not only on a given student's knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, register and so forth, but also in how they exploit language in social contexts to facilitate social integration (community) or distinction (individuality).

Some people come from subcultural contexts that do not predispose them to being linguistically competent relative to the way language is appropriately used in the education system. These same people are also predisposed to rely on an assumed collective understanding of meaning. Bernstein (2003) refers to this as a linguistic *restricted code*. Recasting Celce-Murcia et al.'s (1995) concept of strategic competence in light of Bernstein's (2003) work suggests that

people who are linguistically less competent in their own language tend to use language in a less detailed fashion on the expectation that others within their social context will be in agreement with the meaning of what is being communicated. This style of language use tends to rely on ellipses, short cuts and metaphors based in shared experience (Bourdieu, 1991). In other words, language users who adopt a *restricted code* anticipate that they will probably be in agreement with one another about the meaning of whatever is being communicated. This implied assumption renders redundant the tendency and necessity to negotiate meaning. Consequently, such speakers are more likely to engage in *avoidance strategies* rather than negotiate meaning when faced with a misunderstanding in L1 and consequently L2, as well (Bagaric & Djigunovic, 2007; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995).

While competence in a *restricted code* facilitates communal integration in familial settings, such as when with family and peers, its use has distinct disadvantages in circumstances that are predicated upon displays of individuality and legitimate cultural competence (Bourdieu, 1991). While all speakers of a given language tend to adopt a *restricted code* in familial interactions, more competent language users are also enculturated with an *elaborated code*. This code is differentiated from the *restricted code* in that speakers who use it are more inclined to use language in ways that align with the demands of the scholastic system. Competence in this code promotes achievement and leads to excellence in the scholastic system, because this system rewards articulate, precise and elevated language use. In particular, *elaborated code* inclines speakers to more clearly explicate their ideas and furnish them with more detail on the assumption that other parties in the linguistic exchange may not understand what has been communicated (Bernstein, 2003). The tendency to be more explicit and thorough with language use means that speakers who are able to employ an *elaborated code* are more aware of the need to negotiate meaning. This, in turn, predisposes them to engage in *interactional strategies*, such as checking that they understand one another (Bagaric & Djigunovic, 2007; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995).

## ACTIVITY

Celce-Murcia (2007) suggests that it can be difficult to encourage students to adjust their enculturated verbal behaviour. For some students, this may mean it is necessary to learn to explicitly check understanding – in other words, to adopt some of the strategies implicit in an *elaborated code*. The purpose of the following activity is to highlight the need for students to check that they have understood each other by creating a guaranteed communication breakdown. By forcing a misunderstanding, the issue of face-saving is avoided, since it is clear to all that something has not been understood. The following activity aims to provide strategic tools in the form of routinizable functional language for dealing with miscommunications. This activity also aims to highlight the need for students to provide clear and simple explanations to one another.

### Presentation

1. Write the target language on the board:

Do you understand/follow? Is that clear?	I'm sorry, I don't understand/follow. Can you explain?
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2. Introduce the need to check understanding during lessons to the students by suggesting that sometimes they may hear things that they do not understand.
3. Write a target sentence on the board which contains one (and only one) word the students will not know. For example, 'Our teacher rambles in class.' Then, read it aloud.
4. Wait to see if any of the students query 'ramble'. The students will probably seem confused. If no one responds to the challenge, ask, 'Do you understand/follow?' Then, encourage the

- students to appeal for help by saying, ‘I’m sorry, I don’t understand/follow. Can you explain?’
5. Initially provide the students a complex and elongated explanation of ‘ramble’ with the aim of forcing them to further check their understanding of the target word. Each time a student indicates that they do not understand, give a successively simpler explanation, and ask, ‘Do you understand/follow?’ until the students indicate that they have understood. The logic behind providing successively simpler explanations is to indicate to the students that they should aim to explain things to each other by using simple two-to-four word approximations. ‘Ramble’ should ultimately be approximated to something like ‘doesn’t speak clearly’ or ‘is hard to understand’. It is not necessary that the explanation given is complete or wholly accurate, only that it facilitates a general understanding so that the discussion can be continued. Suggest to the students that they may also need to reformulate their explanations until other students understand.

### **Practice Activity**

1. Give each student a sentence on a strip of paper containing one infrequently used word that they are unlikely to understand. (See Appendix A.)
2. Tell the students that they have one minute to check the meaning of their target word using their dictionaries or smartphones. Circulate while the students are doing this, and provide assistance, as necessary. Allow the students to write notes, but not more than two to four simple words. Some suggested approximations are given in Appendix A. These approximations could be provided to especially low-proficiency classes.
3. Give the students a check sheet each with the target words (see Appendix B). Set a time limit of three to four minutes. Ask the students to circulate, to read their sentences aloud to each other, and to use the target language to check they understand the words in each other’s sentences and successfully explain their target words to each other. Remind the students that they can only talk to each other, and should not show each other their pieces of paper. Stress to the students that they do not need to write the meanings of the target words down, only check them off on their check sheet once they have understood.
4. Encourage the students to use short reaction phrases, such as, ‘Ah, OK’ to indicate they have understood.
5. After the time is up, ask the students to tally up their results, and see who has checked the most words.
6. Provide other feedback, as appropriate.

### **VARIATIONS**

#### **Reducing L1 Use in the Classroom**

This activity can also be adapted as a tool for reducing or eliminating the students’ reliance on using L1 to explain or check their understanding of vocabulary during lessons. Students are often encouraged to help each other with unknown vocabulary by asking, ‘How do you say (L1 vocabulary) in English?’ While this can be an expedient strategy in monolingual classes, it can cause problems for multilingual classes, and may be entirely useless in a native speaker context. As such, the same activity can be used to help students to simply approximate L1 vocabulary so that other speakers can understand what they wish to convey in L2. Again, the students can be provided with sentences in English, but containing one target word in their native language. For example, ‘I usually take *ofuro* before I go to bed at night.’ Again, the students would need to check the target word in an L1-English dictionary, and find a simple approximation of the target word. In this case ‘bath’ would be a good approximation that other students would likely know. From

there, the activity can be repeated, as described above.

### **Low-Proficiency Vocabulary Review**

For lower-proficiency classes, any homework vocabulary needed in class for the lesson's discussion can be reviewed using the same activity.

### **Quick Checking Understanding Skill Review**

These checking understanding skills can also be reviewed quickly as a teacher-fronted activity, as follows:

1. Divide the class into two teams.
2. Ask all of the students to stand.
3. Tell the students you are going to say something which they may not understand. Encourage them to use the target language to indicate that they do not understand and seek clarification.
4. When a student successfully negotiates the meaning of what has been said using the target language, and has indicated that they clearly understood what has been said, they can sit down.
5. The first team with all of its members sitting down is the winner. Repeat as time allows and need dictates.

## **DISCUSSION**

The activity described above and its variations were implemented across three semesters and were generally successful. The activity, as it was introduced, worked well across all levels of English proficiency. The most notable outcome of this activity was that it raised the students' awareness of the need to provide short and simple approximations to each other whenever there was a misunderstanding. However, there was somewhat mixed success where using the functional language was concerned. The students that were already more inclined to check that they understood each other continued to do so. However, those less inclined to check understanding only did so if prompted to by the teacher before speaking tasks. Further, they also tended to check understanding when it was not necessary, suggesting that they were doing so 'because the teacher had asked them to'. This outcome was perhaps not surprising in light of Bernstein (2003) and Bourdieu's (1991) emphasis on the naturalization of linguistic codes across a lifetime of enculturation. In essence, it would probably take a considerable period of exposure and reinforcement before the strategies of negotiating meaning associated with the *elaborated code* became naturalized for students who were not already familiar with it.

The L1 vocabulary version of this activity worked quite well, and tended to result in the students relying less on each other's help when they did not know the English vocabulary for what they wanted to say and less L1 use when negotiating meaning. The lower-level vocabulary review version of this activity only worked well for very low-proficiency classes who had clearly neither read nor checked the vocabulary from their homework tasks. For most other classes, the students found this variation of the activity too easy. Interestingly, many higher proficiency students vocalized the over-simple nature of the task when asked to do it. The quick review variation of this activity worked very well for most classes. Most of the students saw this activity as a kind of competition or game, were able to do it quickly and appeared to enjoy it. However, this variation was best avoided with very low-proficiency classes who found it stressful and potentially humiliating. This activity also complimented other negotiating meaning skills lessons, particularly those on paraphrasing. This suggests that the students were able to transfer the logic of this activity to other communication skills. In particular, the students tended to give simpler paraphrases when

negotiating meaning, and this indicated to each other that they had been listening carefully to one another's ideas.

These *checking understanding* activities can also be woven into other functional language lessons by using ideas and language relevant to the lesson's content. For example, in a technology lesson which focuses on the skill of *giving examples* to explain ideas and/or furnish detail, the teacher could say, 'I think *wearable technology* is very useful'. In reply to this, the students should reply, 'I'm sorry, I don't follow/understand. Can you explain?' The teacher could then iteratively explain 'wearable technology' using examples, each time checking that the students have understood, until the students indicate that they have clearly understood. For example, the teacher could say, 'Such as smart-watches. Do you understand?' Then, 'Another example is Google Glass. Do you follow?' and so on. It is important to watch the students' body language and reactions during this activity to gauge whether they have actually understood what has been negotiated. Students may be inclined to indicate that they have understood in order to complete the activity quickly, rather than actually putting the *checking understanding* skill to use. To avoid this, the teacher can then try to elicit further examples from the students by asking, 'Can you give me another example?'

## CONCLUSION

The proposed activity draws on Bernstein's (2003) view of sociolinguistic competence, which suggests that students who are generally less competent at language-based disciplines employ a *restricted code*, which makes them less inclined to seek clarification, or clearly explicate their ideas to one another. This activity aims to help such students to recognize when there has been a communication breakdown, and provide them with some skills to repair misunderstandings. In particular, the activity addresses an aspect of sociolinguistic competence by providing students with functional language to check that they understand each other, and strategies for simplifying their explanations to one another. The variations of this activity provided can be used in a variety of learning situations to reinforce and practice the *checking understanding* communication skill, as well as revise and practice lesson vocabulary.

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### APPENDIX A

#### Checking Understanding

##### Sentences

1. My favourite food is <u>aioli</u> .
2. I went to <u>Liechtenstein</u> for my winter vacation.
3. My cat often <u>scurries</u> around the house.
4. My mother cooked a <u>scrumptious</u> dinner last night.
5. That was a <u>peculiar</u> question.
6. Too much homework <u>exhausts</u> me.
7. The <u>balalaika</u> is really difficult to play.
8. I went for a <u>strenuous</u> run yesterday.
9. I was <u>ecstatic</u> after I passed the quiz.

##### Target Word Approximations

garlic, mayonnaise
small country between Austria and Switzerland
run quickly like a small animal
delicious
strange
makes very tired
Russian guitar
tiring, hard
very happy

### APPENDIX B

#### Checking Understanding

Check (✓) in the table below when you understand each other's words.

Word	Checked	Word	Checked
ramble	✓	peculiar	
aioli		exhaust	
Liechtenstein		balalaika	
scurries		strenuous	
scrumptious		ecstatic	