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# Assessing What a Second Language Learner Knows Through Student-Teacher Interaction

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# Assessing What a Second Language Learner Knows Through Student-Teacher Interaction

# ASSESSING WHAT A SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNER KNOWS THROUGH STUDENT-TEACHER INTERACTION <sup>1</sup>

Joanna Labov

In the TESOL classroom, interaction between teacher and student may determine the success of an exchange (Long and Sato, 1983), (Brock, 1986) (Pica, Young, Doughty, 1986). However, the communicative success of an exchange is difficult to measure due to the multidimensional factors involved in communication and the presence of misunderstandings.

The extent of detected and undetected miscommunication between second language learners and native speakers of a language has not been studied extensively, nor is its effect in the language learning process currently known. What has been shown is that knowledge of results plays an important role in language learning (Long, 1977). Long (1977) has pointed to an apparent lack of clarity and consistency in teacher-feedback directed at learners in the TESOL classroom.<sup>2</sup> It has not been determined yet which discourse strategies best promote clarity and consistency in teachers' feedback nor promote or impede communication.

This paper presents episodes of detected misunderstandings and instances of noncommunication between Pa, a Laotian Hmong student, and his TESOL teacher during an oral evaluation. It is a case study which investigates the role of the following variables in assessing the student's proficiency of English and in assessing communication between teacher and student: the discourse strategies adapted, the lack of shared background among the interlocutors, the student's nonnative use of phonology and his choice of lexis.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF COMMUNICATION AND MISCOMMUNICATION

For this study, the term "communication" refers to any exchange between a speaker and a listener in which the listener receives an interpretation seemingly identical to that of the speaker's intended message.<sup>3</sup> Hymes (1974:15) observes:

To define communication as the triggering of a response [as Hockett [1958:573] has done, and Kluckhohn [1961:895] has accepted], is to make the term so nearly equivalent to behavior and interaction in general as to lose its specific value as a scientific and moral conception.

In addition, the concept put forth by Hawkins of "assumed communication" (Hawkins, 1982) refers to the belief by at least one of the interlocutors that successful communication has taken place between both parties.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I use the term "miscommunication" to refer to a difference between propositional meaning (Austin, 1965) and listener perception and the term "noncommunication" to mean a listener's global lack of comprehension.

Most conversation analysts agree that communication occurs through the negotiation of meaning in interaction between speakers who have shared knowledge and backgrounds (Labov and Fanshel, 1977) (Gumperz and Tannen, 1979). Furthermore, Gumperz (1972:4) notes that the process of communication requires "both shared grammar and rules of language use" [pragmatic rules of language use]. Savignon (1983:4) observes "...meaning is never one sided. Rather, it is negotiated between the persons involved."

Varonis and Gass (1985) have noted the role that the lack of shared linguistic, social and cultural factors play in observed misunderstandings between native and nonnative interlocutors. Thus, miscommunication may occur even though the interlocutors' speech is free of lexical, grammatical and phonological errors that occur among nonnative and native speakers of English. It may be wholly or in part due to speakers' differing schemata or interpretations.

It is the mark of polite conversation for interlocutors to pay attention, to ask relevant questions, and to respond accordingly. However, Hawkins (1982) has shown that there is a danger in using the concept of "appropriate response" as a measure of communication. Responses that are appropriate when comprehension exists can be misleading if there is no comprehension between the interlocutors. Hawkins (1982) found that native-nonnative miscomprehension was difficult to measure since the nonnative speakers responded appropriately to the native speakers but their responses did not always signal comprehension.<sup>5</sup>

Gumperz (1982:1) warns that conversational responses may not signal the presence of understanding:

Only when a move has elicited a response can we say that communication is taking place. However, there are other types of situations in which interlocutors' responses do not necessarily indicate that they have understood their partner's intended message.

Even between native speakers, there may be conversation without communication of information in the strict sense. Malinowski's concept of phatic communion does not necessitate understand- Malinowski (1933:315) explains its function as "a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words." According to the definition of communication that I introduced above, "an exchange between a speaker and a listener in which the listener receives an interpretation which is seemingly identical to that of the speaker's intended message", communication does not exist without some comprehension.

## THE STUDY

During the Fall of 1986 I observed classroom discourse and interaction at the Community College of Philadelphia to study the question "What role do discourse strategies play in promoting or impeding communication between student and teacher?" This paper provides a detailed examination of a short segment of interaction between a student and a teacher during an oral evaluation. The analysis examines some of the constraints that are inherent

in a situation which demands that a beginning second language learner's speech be fluent and comprehensible.

### Participants in the Study

**The Student:** At the time of the study, Pa, 24 years old, had been in the United States for several years and was repeating the class for the second time. He may have attended three years of college in Laos. He had worked as a cook at a Thai restaurant in Philadelphia before he had attended the Community College of Philadelphia. Pa is a speaker of Hmong, Laotian and some Thai ("50% know" in his words, or 50% proficiency).

As will be seen, Pa shows tremendous difficulty in communicating in English<sup>6</sup>. His speech style which relies heavily on the use of content words, can be characterized as "telegraphic speech." At times he does not use; verbs, pronouns, prepositions, articles and cohesive and coherent ties.

**The Teacher:** The teacher, who is a skilled instructor, provides an invaluable source for this discourse analysis. She strove to promote an environment in which a student who is barely proficient in English can maximize his performance. Although an experienced TESOL teacher, this was her first time teaching a Speaking and Listening class. She is not a speaker of either Hmong, Laotian or Thai.

### Data Collection

The data collection consisted of tape recording the final oral evaluation of a lower-intermediate Speaking and Listening class.<sup>7</sup> The teacher had announced to the class previous to the day of the evaluation the topic of the evaluation. She asked the students to describe a holiday of their native country.<sup>8</sup> The holiday that the Hmong student chose to describe was the Laotian Hmong New Year.

Present at Pa's evaluation were Pa, the teacher and the researcher. The student was aware that he was being recorded, for the teacher's and the researcher's tape recorders were placed on the table in full view throughout the evaluation.

In order to pass the evaluation, Pa was required to display a level of fluency (in terms of continuous speech production) which was more advanced than his proficiency in English. After collecting and analyzing the data, it became apparent to the researcher that the teacher and the student did not share the same linguistic systems, pragmatic rules of language use or cultural awareness regarding the New Year holiday. Thus, in order to clarify my understanding of Pa's culture, I consulted with Gail Weinstein-Shr, who has worked extensively as teacher and researcher with the Hmong community.<sup>9</sup>

### The Student's and Teacher's Use of Interactional Modifications

Due to the nature of an oral evaluation, it may be presumed that if the student did not fully understand the teacher's questions or comments, the evaluation would not be the appropriate time to express his lack of comprehension or press for clarification. The rules for interaction during the evaluation emphasized fluent conversation (i.e. "public-language", Goffman (1963), used to perform and display ability to speak fluently), between the participants.

Table 1 displays the student's use of the interactional modifications: confirmation checks and comprehension checks. (See Pica, Young, Doughty, 1986, Long, 1980 for definitions). Note the student's use of zero clarification checks.

**Table 1**

#### The Student's Use of Interactional Modifications

Comprehension Checks	Confirmation Checks	Clarification Checks
17	1	0

The student used the comprehension checks "right?" and "you know?" throughout the evaluation and one confirmation check at the end of the evaluation when he was confirming the day of the written examination. Examples of these interactional modifications are shown in Table 2.

## Table 2

### Examples of the Student's Interactional Modifications

#### Comprehension Checks:

302. student: a large grass and some...um a grass grass shopper, right?

310. student: If you don't believe so you eat right?

344. student: Uh Thats um if um if um whose um have good idea and whose um have um learn a lots from like uh learn English all right?

#### Confirmation Check:

392. student: Friday morning?

The teacher used a great amount of confirmation checks (27 tokens-63%) which appears to create a non-threatening atmosphere conducive to conversation. Table 3 displays the amount and type of interactional modifications used by the teacher.

## Table 3

### Quantification of Interactional Modifications Used by the Teacher

Confirmation Checks	27
Clarification Checks	
Yes/No questions	3
Wh questions	4
Declarative statement	3
Comprehension Checks	2
Total	45

The teacher tried forty five times to understand the student by asking for confirmation, clarification and verification of comprehension. The following four



examples are interactional modifications used by the teacher (see Pica, Young, Doughty, 1988 for definitions, Long 1980).

Table 4

Examples of the Teacher's Interactional Modifications

Requests for Clarification

129. teacher: I'm a little confused here.

177. teacher: I'm a little lost here. I got to tell you.

Request for Confirmation

317 teacher: little animals?

Comprehension Check

401. I'll see you Friday morning O.K.?

According to the teacher and affirmed by the researcher, both the teacher's and the student's speech styles can be classified informally as "information fillers."<sup>10</sup> This means that their speech styles are interactive due to the interlocutors' quest for supplying and receiving information to each other. It can be assumed that the constant interaction between Pa and the teacher indicates a high degree of cooperative involvement. This conversational style follows one of Lakoff's Rule of Politeness (1973) (later called Rules of Rapport): Be friendly (Camaraderie).<sup>11</sup>

The Speaking and Listening Evaluation

The teacher began the evaluation by asking the student, Pa, to talk about a Hmong holiday. The student discussed the Hmong New Year and their preparations for the New Year celebration. According to Pa, on December 27th, the Hmong begin three days of preparation. From January first through the third the Hmong abide by the traditional Hmong regulations of what tasks they are allowed or are not allowed to perform (for example, not touching knives, not blowing on a fire and not eating green vegetables).

Although the teacher was interested in learning the details of the Hmong New Year celebration and the student was motivated to perform well during the evaluation, neither of the inter-locutors needed to obtain absolute factual accuracy.<sup>12</sup> The teacher's rationale for asking about the holiday was to provide a basis with which to evaluate Pa's fluency in English. By choosing this topic the teacher ensured that the students' familiarity with the discourse domain would promote fluency (Selinker and Douglas, 1985). However, in assessing language competence, Higgs's and Clifford's suggestion (1982) is relevant to the assessment of second language learners' speech in oral evaluations:

The question that needs to be asked is not merely "Was the student able to communicate?" but "What was he able to communicate and how?"<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, many other aspects of a language also need to be assessed: skill in verbal interaction, grammatical complexity, register, style and appropriateness of "discourse" as a whole.

The teacher could not have tested Pa on the factual accuracy of his description because she is not familiar with Hmong holidays.<sup>14</sup> If she had been planning to attend a Hmong New Year celebration in Laos, communication would have been more likely secured through the teacher's need to fill an "information gap" (Johnson and Morrow, 1981).

In administering oral evaluations which evaluate a student's proficiency in a language, teachers have the difficult job of encouraging the student's speech and at the same time participating in a conversation in which they may not be aware of how much information they may be miscomprehending. By responding cooperatively (Grice, 1975), Pa's teacher encouraged Pa by providing positive feedback during times when Pa found it difficult to articulate his thoughts in English.

At no time that the teacher did not understand the student's speech did she damage his "public face" (Goffman, 1963) or "positive face" (Brown and Levinson, 1978).

Communication may have been sacrificed between teacher and student for the sake of face-saving, an essential prerequisite for the student's persistence in language learning.

Based on the student's performance during the oral evaluation and on a written examination on an unrelated topic several days later, the teacher determined that the student should retake the class once again. The student was given a grade of "Making Progress."

After the student had left the Learning Lab, (the site where the evaluation had taken place), the teacher mentioned to the researcher that she had not understood the student's explanations regarding the Hmong's rituals. Of significance is the teacher's formulation of her involvement as a determinant in the outcome of the misunderstanding:

412. teacher: O.K. that's very complicated-xxx But why would you not eat vegetables and why would you not drink except if you had to leave?  
413. JL: Maybe cause you're farmers and vegetables are your livelihood.  
414. teacher: That's what your everyday thing -  
415. JL: So  
416. teacher: That was what I was thinking but I couldn't quite get that idea from him. I mean that I felt that idea was coming from my head

The teacher noted that she did not know why the Hmong do not drink at the Hmong New Year ceremony. She commented at another time that perhaps the reason she had not asked was because she feared she would not understand the response. What is missing in the data is an evaluation by the student of how well he thought he understood the teacher's questions and comments (Hawkins, 1982). 15

Another instance of "non-communication" is the student's explanation of why the Hmong do not drink at their ceremony (See Appendix B). It can be hypothesized that either 1) the student did not understand the teacher's questions, 2) did not know the answer or 3) knew the answer but did not know how to express it so that the teacher would understand.

The teacher and student used clarification checks and confirmation checks to resolve misunderstandings over whether the Hmong fast or feast during the New Year ceremony

and what was the sequence of events concerning the Hmong's ritual of leaving their ceremony to drink. These misunderstandings will be treated in detail after the relevant discourse strategies are shown.

### ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSE STRATEGIES USED IN THE EVALUATION

Interlocutors use a variety of conversational strategies depending on whether they believe that they have understood each other. The discourse strategies used by the student and the teacher during the evaluation can be categorized into two groups: those that may have promoted communication and those that may have impeded communication.

I use the term "promoted" to refer to the speakers' creation of opportunities for negotiation of meaning to clarify information not understood previously. In addition, I use the concept of discourse strategies promoting communication (and not "resulting" in communication), because I do not claim a direct causal relationship between discourse strategy and the communicative success of an interaction. Due to the nature of the situation researched, in which all contributing factors could not be controlled, there was no way to verify that communication resulted.

#### Discourse Strategies Which May Have Promoted Communication

In the first set of discourse strategies examined, the teacher reminded the student several times the location and place of the written examination. Subsequently the student appeared at the designated time and place to take the examination. A direct correlation is not being claimed regarding the student's comprehension of the teacher's speech. It seems likely that there was a causal relation, but it is also possible that the student understood the teacher's reminders by asking a fellow student at a later date.

**Confirmation Check and Comprehension Checks:** At the end of the evaluation, the teacher needed to confirm that the student understood when and where the written examination would take place (See Appendix B).

391. teacher: O.K. I will see you on Friday morning.  
 392. student: Friday morning?  
 393. teacher: Yes, we have a test in B.  
 394. student: So  
 395. teacher: Same room  
 396. student: O.K.  
 397. teacher: same time. Nine o'clock.  
 398. student: O.K.  
 399. teacher: On Friday morning  
 400. student: O.K.  
 401. teacher: I'll see you Friday morning. O.K.?  
 402. student: O.K.  
 403. teacher: Just be about an hour. O.K?  
 404. student: O.K.

After the student had confirmed that the examination would take place on Friday morning (line \*392), the teacher again reminded him of its date (line \*401). At the same time, she confirmed his understanding with the comprehension marker "O.K." In this manner, the teacher used a series of "checkpoints" to remind the student the time and the location of the examination and to ensure his comprehension.

**Confirmation Check:** In the following example, the conversation teacher used a discourse style which consists of reformulating their comments in the form of a question in order to confirm her understanding (\*172). In this sequence the student explains the Hmong's ritual which forbids drinking at their ceremony.

166. student: the um eat rice with um water un river and some  
 some things. That's it we don't eat with the water  
 and with the type of soda we don't eat only three  
 days. If you want to drink or for um parties um in  
 the party we have  
 167. teacher: Um hum  
 168. student: but after party on January first  
 169. teacher: Mum hum  
 170. student: so we don't have to eat for the party if whose have  
 the party in the so they don't drink for the party.  
 171. teacher: Mum hum  
 172. student: If you want to drink, so you want to um...you get up from the  
 party and you go to drink.  
 173. teacher: Oh, you go somewhere else and drink?  
 174. student: Yeah, after finish then um after you drink sens come back xxx  
 (obscure) and have party.

In line \*173 it appears as if the teacher understood the sequence of the events but not the rationale. Here, the student is able to communicate information regarding the "here and now" but not to convey abstract concepts. His assertion that the Hmong leave the party to drink conflicts with the teacher's assumption and past life experiences in which people drink at parties.

**Clarification Check, Open-Ended Questions and Confirmation Check:** The teacher used a clarification check in line \*129, an open ended question (Wh-question) in line \*135 and a confirmation check in line \*137.

120. student: Foe, so on the, no eh January first  
121. teacher: Mum Hum  
122. student: until January thirch, three day  
123. teacher: Mum hum  
124. student: so we don't touch anything, don't eat green vegetable, dum my English no (obscure) bro so that you know um bro the fire? bro like (pantomimes blowing motion).  
125. teacher: Oh, blow on the fire. Yeah  
126. student: They don't have even whose uh do like this on the already the old men  
127. teacher: People stop doing  
128. student: Yeah, yeah  
129. teacher: I'm con I'm a little con I'm a little confused here.  
130. student: Yeah, the people stop wo--  
131. teacher: They stop working? or they?  
132. student: Yeah  
133. teacher: or they stop making things?  
134. student: Yeah  
135. teacher: For how long?  
136. student: For uh three day.  
137. teacher: For three days?  
138. student: Yeah. Stop working and something.

Pa answered the teacher's questions affirmatively in lines \*132 and \*134. One result was to prolong the conversation, which in itself may be a means of promoting communication. However, prolonging the conversation may result in miscommunication if the student is unwilling to question the teacher's reformulations. The student may not have

thought it was important to correct the teacher, or may have considered it impolite to correct her or may actually have misunderstood her.

### Discourse Strategies Which May Have Promoted Miscommunication

The teacher used four discourse strategies that may have inadvertently led to miscommunication: 1) backchanneling designed to indicate her comprehension in instances where the teacher actually did not understand the student, but thought that she had; 2) backchanneling to continue the conversation when the teacher did not understand the student; 3) alternative questions; 4) an interruption.

**Confusing Backchanneling:** Backchanneling devices used in teacher-student interaction do not always indicate comprehension.<sup>16</sup> Backchanneling can be used in three different situations: 1) when a teacher has understood the student and is signaling comprehension; 2) when a teacher thinks he or she has understood the student but has not, ("assumed communication") and signals comprehension; 3) when a teacher signals for the student to continue whether or not he or she has understood. They may be designed to serve as encouragement to the student to continue.

The teacher's frequent use of backchannel signals like "Mmmm", "Mum hum" and "Uh huh" may have led the student to think that she had understood him. However, the Hmong speaker's telegraphic speech which often resulted in incoherence intra and intersententially meant that during the evaluation his descriptions were not always comprehensible: i.e., there was insufficient discourse competence (Savignon, 1984). (see Appendix A)

**Alternative Questions:** The conversation teacher asked the student six alternative questions ("or-questions"), which according to Hatch (1983) are a characteristic of foreigner talk.

Like backchanneling, alternative questions may serve an interactive function and thus promote conversation if they succeed in eliciting speech. However, it is possible for the student to understand only one alternative or possibly neither alternative.<sup>17</sup>

The following quotation functioned by "forcing" the students to choose an answer even when neither of the alternatives posed were correct.

155. teacher: You don't eat anything or you just eat vegetables?

As seen from the data, alternative questions continue miscomprehension if the choices themselves are incorrect. The teacher asked the student to answer alternative questions and then repeated his utterances when she did not understand.

Perhaps if the teacher had asked more "wh-questions" the possibility for communication would have increased. For example, if the teacher had asked the student in line 167 "What do you do?" or "What do you eat?" (during the three days of the holiday) instead of "You stop eating?" more details might have been obtained and perhaps communication would have resulted. The student might have replied "We prepare food for the holiday. We don't eat it until then." Instead Pa used the referent "that" which the teacher did not understand due to phonological reasons.

**The Teacher's Interruption:** The teacher interrupted the student once, as seen in the following example:

130. student: Yeah, the people stop wo-  
131. teacher: They stop working? or they  
132. student: Yeah  
133. teacher: or they stop making things?  
134. student: Yeah

There is no guarantee that the student understood the teacher or that if the teacher had not interrupted him in line \*130 that his speech would have been comprehensible.

The teacher is a highly proficient and experienced TESOL professional. Yet, as can be seen, the comprehension of a second language learner's speech is a difficult task. The above discourse strategies may have been designed to provide direction and support to the student and the teacher's desire to understand the student's speech.



A DETAILED ANALYSIS OF A MISCOMMUNICATION-- "FAST" OR "FEAST" AT THE HMONG NEW YEAR?

The following example illustrates many of the discourse strategies given above. At this point, Pa is trying to explain a Hmong eating custom of the New Year's celebration. But he has trouble conveying the information. Note the clarification check in line \*129.

120. student: For, so on the, eh January first  
 122. student: Until January thirch, three day  
 123. teacher: Mum hum  
 124. student: so we...don't touch anything, don't eat green vegetable, don't my English I no xxx [bro] (blow) so that you know um [bro] the fire?, [bro] like (pantomimes blowing motion).  
 125. teacher: Oh, blow on the fire. Yeah  
 126. student: They don't have even whose uh do like this on the already the old men.  
 127. teacher: People stop doing  
 128. student: Yeah, yeah  
 129. teacher: I'm con-I'm a little con-I'm a little confused here.  
 130. student: Yeah, the people stop wo-  
 131. teacher: They stop working? or they  
 132. student: Yeah  
 133. teacher: or they stop making things?  
 134. student: Yeah  
 135. teacher: For how long?  
 136. student: For uh three day  
 137. teacher: For three days?  
 138. student: yeah, stop working and something. Eating eat for for the wood [wu?] for the food [futs]. (i.e. gather firewood to prepare food).  
 139. teacher: Uh huh  
 140. student: So we, stop ooh uh eat the green, like uh the green vegetable  
 141. teacher: Uh huh  
 142. student: (which are all) green...(year?) take 'em from-from the farmer, from the garden (so).  
 143. teacher: Uh huh. So they-  
 144. student: So they do (?) eat  
 145. teacher: So they prepare ahead of time. They didn't they get ready before.  
 146. student: Yeah.  
 147. teacher: Now, in these three days, you stop eating? No.  
 148. student: Stop eating das das food (-We don't eat that food)  
 149. teacher: Oh, O.K.  
 150. student: After three days we can eat. So, after three days then we can eat (-We can eat that food).  
 151. teacher: Oh, then you can eat. It sounds like Lent, sort of (to the researcher).  
 152. JL: For three days they fast? (to the teacher)  
 153. teacher: For three days?  
 154. student: Yeah.

The interaction immediately following the above sequence illustrates the teacher's alternative question (line #153) which inadvertently forced the student to choose between lines #138-154):

155. teacher: You don't eat anything or you just eat vegetables?  
156. student: No, don't eat vegetables.  
157. teacher: You don't eat...anything, you eat nothing?  
158. student: No, only eat rice and meats and like that all the vegetables and they don't eat.  
159. teacher: O.K. You eat rice and meat.  
160. student: Yeah  
161. teacher: but you don't eat vegetables.  
162. student: Yeah  
163. teacher: for three days  
164. student: Yeah and  
165. teacher: O.K.

Pa had trouble making clear to the teacher the specific Hmong eating rituals. It may have been the case that Pa was saying that the Hmong abstain from eating the food that they prepare for the feast or that they don't eat green vegetables during the celebration. There could also be other alternatives that are not immediately apparent. Pa told the teacher that the Hmong don't eat green vegetables (line #124). The teacher asked him "You don't eat anything or you just eat vegetables?" which showed that she had not understood his statement "Don't eat green vegetables." (line #124)

The teacher interrupted the student by saying "O.K.," which possibly signaled that she had thought that she had understood the student (line #163). The teacher showed a number of different understandings of the student's narrative in lines #138-163.

1. The Hmong stop eating for three days.
2. The Hmong do not eat green vegetables for three days.
3. The Hmong eat rice and meat for three days.

However, as Weinstein-Shr pointed out, (and as her Hmong informant confirmed), the Hmong do not fast during their celebration, rather they feast. The student explained that the Hmong "Stop eating <das> <das> (that) (that) food. So, after three days then we can eat."

(line \*148) in response to the teacher's question "For three days?" (line \*153). Miscommunication may have been due to phonological reasons. It is probable that the student pronounced the word "that" as "das" (line \*148). Thus, the voiced interdental fricative /θ/ was voiced as the alveolar stop /d/.

In reviewing the transcript, the teacher noted the point in the conversation where she feels she began to misunderstand Pa. This occurred when she reformulated his utterances in line (\*127):

127. teacher: People stop doing<sup>18</sup>

from Pa's most immediate preceding statements "They don't have even whose uh do like this on the already the old men." (line \*126) and in line \*124 "So we...don't touch anything. don't eat green vegetables, don't my English I no xxx...". The teacher interrupted the student's explanation of what the Hmong "stop" doing or don't do during the three days before the Hmong New Year. The student had begun to say what was possibly the word "work" (wo), in "Yeah, the people stop wo-" (line \*131) but was interrupted by the teacher's alternative question:

They stop working or they stop making things?  
(line \*131-133)

This question is an attempt at reformulating what the student had been in the process of saying.

The teacher posed the idea that the Hmong stop eating (line \*147) and then quickly added a "No," as if saying that she did not believe it. Pa's use of a transitive form of the verb "to eat" ("So after three days then we can eat." line \*150) without specifying an object apparently confirmed for the teacher that the Hmong do not eat for three days. This is why she said to the researcher in the following line that it reminded her of Lent (when some people fast).<sup>19</sup>

After the teacher mentioned to the researcher the similarity that she saw between Lent and the Hmong New Year celebration preparations, the researcher asked "For three days they fast?" (line \*152) to which the teacher questioned the student "For three days?"

(line #153). He might have understood the question to mean whether the preparations take three days and responded affirmatively in response.

Instead of asking Pa "Where do the people at this party drink?" the teacher supplied the answers for him in the form of a yes/no question. She thus established a series of "check-points" (comprehension checks) by restating Pa's answers to determine if her comprehension of the student's speech was accurate. By "checkpoint" I mean the use of short answers said with an slow intonation which indicated the speaker's willingness to be contradicted. For example:

166. student: The um eat rice with um water unriver and some some things. That's it we don't eat with the water and with the like a soda we don't eat only three days. If you want to drink or for um parties um in the party we have

167. teacher: Um hum

168. student: but after party on January first

169. teacher: Mum hum

170. student: so we don't have to eat for the party if <hoz> host have the party in the so they don't drink for the party.

171. teacher: Mum hum

172. student: If you want to drink, so you want to um...you get up from the party and <ju> go to drink.

173. teacher: Oh, you go somewhere else and drink.

174. student: yeah, after finish then um after you drink <Eas> sens come back xxx (obscure) and have party.

175. teacher: Now now the people who are in this party

176. student: Yeah

177. teacher: I'm a little lost here I got to tell you. The people in this party are eating rice.

178. student: Yeah

179. teacher: and meat

180. student: Yeah

181. teacher: but if they want something to drink...they go somewhere different?

182. student: Yeah

183. teacher: take a drink

184. student: yeah

185. teacher: and then come back?

186. student: Yeah

In the exchange displayed above (lines 166- 186), Pa states that the people who are attending the celebration leave the party to drink. The teacher reaffirms this with a declarative statement to which Pa responds affirmatively. Yet, in lines 175 through

186 the teacher double-checked once again by asking comprehension checks ascertain her understanding of what the student had said.

### FINDINGS

Six findings are suggested by this study:

- 1) Teachers who administer oral evaluations are placed into the dual role of interlocutor/facilitator.
- 2) The teacher's use of the interactional modifications-clarification checks, confirmation checks and comprehension checks may have promoted communication.
- 3) The teacher's use of a topic which was not familiar to her and her use of confusing backchanneling promoted fluency (continuous speech production) but not a successful exchange of information.
- 4) Communication may have been impeded by lack of shared knowledge among the interlocutors due to the nature of the task, several of the teacher's discourse strategies and the student's nonnative use of phonology and lexis.
- 5) This study confirms the apparent lack of clarity and consistency in teacher-feedback noted by Long in 1977 with regard to the use of backchanneling.
- 6) A dynamic exists between the interlocutors' desire to maintain fluency of speech and the nonnative speaker's ability to produce grammatically correct sentences with appropriate lexical choices.

### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Language learning is believed by many second language acquisition researchers to be a process of hypothesis-testing, hypothesis confirmation and rule-modification. With regard to these processes, second language learners depend on learning the communicative success of their interaction with interlocutors. This is in accordance with the important role that knowledge of results plays in language learning.

Pa's teacher often asked for clarification and expressed a lack of understanding of what Pa had said. Her double role of interlocutor/facilitator required her to participate fully in the conversation and also to encourage Pa in his attempts to converse. Yet if she had terminated the conversation at the points where she did not understand she might not have been considered a good interlocutor.

Although conversation teachers do not want to break the flow of conversation, students need to know when there is a communication breakdown. If the teacher were to evaluate fully the student's speech for factual accuracy she would be required to "stall" the evaluation at points in which she was dubious of comprehension. Then she would have to verify meaning through either an interpreter or through time taking measurements such as enactment etc. During an oral evaluation this is difficult to accomplish when there occur many communication breakdowns, detected and undetected.

The teacher's assessment of the student's proficiency was limited due to the topic of the evaluation which was too advanced and thus emphasized fluency rather than accurate exchange of content. Oral evaluations of advanced second language learners' speech might profitably include topics which require shared cultural schemata between teacher and student. This strategy would challenge the student's knowledge of the pragmatic rules of second language use. The results might prove valuable as information regarding techniques of assessing pragmatic rules of language use without shared cultural schemata.

The teacher's use of back-channeling and the student's and teacher's efforts to maintain a coherent conversation, often gave the impression that communication had taken place when in fact it had not. Although the teacher was consistent in her attempts to encourage the student's efforts to converse in English, the student would no doubt be discouraged if he were to know the full extent of his failure to communicate.<sup>20</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The oral assessment of students' proficiency in a second language is multifaceted. Several challenges exist for TESOL conversation teachers in assessing the proficiency of second language learners during oral evaluations: 1) promoting accurate exchange of information 2) encouraging ongoing fluent conversation, 3) informing students of the communicative success of the interaction to further their progress in the second language learning process.

The examination of the role that the teacher's discourse strategies played in promoting communication between teacher and student revealed that the interactional modifications- clarification checks, confirmation checks and comprehension checks- may have promoted communication. The use of confusing back-channeling, alternative questions and an interruption may have promoted miscommunication. TESOL teachers might investigate for themselves whether indeed the above discourse strategies promote or impede communication.

The analysis of detected and undetected misunderstandings and instances of noncommunication can serve a multitude of purposes with regard to the assessment of second language proficiency and the role discourse strategies play in communication between student and teacher. The identification and quantification of misunderstandings will prove helpful in determining the extent to which speakers miscommunicate.

Suggestions for further research in assessing student-teacher interaction include the following questions regarding discourse strategies: How does the student interpret the teacher's response of "Mmmm", "Mum huh" and "Uh huh", e.g. involvement, encouragement or comprehension? How do the student and teacher determine if each other understands his or her speech? Which discourse strategies minimize misunderstandings? What is the ideal ratio in the classroom for openended vs. alternative questions?

It is not yet clear how extensively each discourse strategy should be used to promote interaction and hopefully, communication. What is the role of visual cues with regard to discourse strategies? Videotaped oral evaluations might provide valuable information regarding the paralinguistic variable that accompanies miscommunication. How would the findings of this study compare with those found in a large scale quantitative examination of the discourse strategies of interlocutors during an oral evaluation?

1. This paper was originally written for Dr. Teresa Pica's classes in classroom discourse and interaction and second language acquisition. The author wishes to thank Myong Ok Hwang Kramer, Teresa Labor, Jane Labotta, Teresa Pica and Gail Weinstein-Shr for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

2 Pica (1986) notes: "Theoretical claims have [also] been made (cf. Corder 1973; Higgs and Clifford 1982; Swain 1985) that learners gain opportunities to develop their productive capacity in the second language if demands are placed on them to manipulate their current interlanguage system so that they can make their initially unclear messages become meaningful to their interlocutors."

3 Canale (1983) notes that "as pointed out by Haley (1963) and others, such information [which is transmitted in interaction] is never permanently worked out nor fixed but is constantly changing and qualified by such factors as further information, context of communication, choice of language forms, and non-verbal behavior. In this sense communication involves the continuous evaluation and negotiation of meaning on the part of the participants, as described by Candlin (1980), Wells (1981) and others.

4 It may be difficult if not impossible to uncover speaker's actual intended message even when two native speakers are involved.

5 Hawkins (1982) recommends future research to "determine if there is a pattern which exists which would sift out appropriate responses that do not signal comprehension from those that do."

6 At the end of the evaluation, the student commented that he had wanted to write a composition about the Hmong New Year but could not find the words in English in his dictionary.

7 I would like to thank the teacher for her kindness in permitting me to observe, study her classroom and for sharing her reflections on the communicative success of the interactions.

8 The teacher remarked to the researcher that it appeared to her as if the student had not planned his discourse prior to the evaluation. Thus, his speech may be considered "unplanned discourse." (Ochs, 1979).

9 Weinstein-Shr completed an ethnographic study of the Hmong community for her dissertation entitled "From Mountaintops to City Streets: An Ethnographic Investigation of Literacy and Social Process Among the Hmong of Philadelphia" and is director of Project LEIF - Learning English Through Intergenerational Friendship which in Philadelphia serves 125 refugee adults, 25 of whom are Hmong. "Survival School for Refugees - In South Phila., Asians Conquer English - and their fears" Philadelphia Inquirer Sunday April 26, 1987.

Weinstein-Shr provided background information that was needed for a more informed guess to interpret the miscommunications that occurred and the possible reasons for them.

After Weinstein-Shr discussed her insights and hypotheses regarding the data, she later questioned a Hmong speaker regarding the Hmong New Year ceremony to verify the factual accuracy of the student's description.

10 The teacher used this gloss to refer to the student's speech styles and those of her own.

11 Tannen (1986) extrapolates on the relationship between Lakoff's Rules of Politeness and conversational style: "In choosing the form of an utterance, speakers observe one or another of these rules [1. Don't impose (Distance), 2. Offer options (Deference) and 3. Be friendly (Camaraderie)]. Furthermore, each of these rules, when applied in interaction, creates a particular stylistic effect, as indicated by the terms in parentheses. That is, according to Tannen, preference for honoring one or another of these politeness



principles results in a communicative strategy which makes up style. Conversely, conversational style results from habitual use of linguistic devices motivated by these overall strategies.

12 It is widely acknowledged that interlocutors may share similar but limited goals. Some of the general goals of conversation include: (1) an exchange of information, (2) the maintenance of social bonds of friendship, kinship, (3) the negotiation of statuses and roles (4) decisions and joint action. Most of these are not the goals of "conversation teachers" in evaluating student: (2) and (4) are barely present and (1) can be quite limited as well.

13 Higgs and Clifford (1982) note "The question of how well one must perform in order to communicate successfully continues to be a matter of serious debate, but it appears that no one has asked why there should be such vigorous differences of opinion in this area. One reason may be that the discussants are working with restricted ranges of language proficiency and often base their opinions on totally different communicative tasks."

14 An important variable in the miscommunications that occurred may have been whether the student was aware of how little the teacher knew about his culture. At the end of the evaluation (line 372-375) after the misunderstanding regarding the food, the teacher said that "all this was new to me." An important question to be asked would be whether the student was aware of this before the start of the evaluation.

15 The method of retrospective analysis is useful but at times is insufficient because of the unreliability of recalled data.

16 The utterances "Uh huh" and "Mmmm" have been labeled as "assent terms" (Schegloff, 1968 p. 109), "feedback items" (Dittman and Llewellyn, 1968, p. 80), "backchannel cues" (Yngve, 1970, p. 568), "verbal reinforcers" and "recognition responses" (Rosenfeld, 1973, p. 67), "short utterances" (Kendon, 1967), "tying terms" (Sacks, lecture 22, p. 111, 10/10/67?) and "underlining others" (T. Labov, 1980, p. 1973).

These discourse strategies will continue to be referred to as "backchanneling devices".

17 A further disadvantage of alternative questions is that the student may choose a one word answer which may lead to a termination of the subject under discussion.

18 Weinstein-Shr posits that it is likely that Pa used the word "Stop" to mean "don't" ("We don't eat that food") in response to the teacher's question "Now in these three days, you stop eating?, No." (line 147). This would mean that the student meant to say that the Hmong do not eat the food that they are preparing for the three day celebration and not that they fast for three days.

Weinstein-Shr further hypothesizes that the teacher's repeated use of the verb "stop" in lines 127, 131 and 133 influenced the student to use the word "stop" in the sentences "So we stop ooh uh eat the gree, like uh the green vegetable (line 140) and in the sentence "Stop eating <das> <das> (that) food." (line 140).

19 What is not known is the effect of the teacher's comment to the researcher on the student's understanding of English. It is possible that the student may have become more sensitive to the presence of the researcher than he would have been before the teacher's remark to the researcher. Pa might have become hesitant to clarify any misunderstandings (and thus suffer even greater loss of "face" ) in front of a third party.

20 The student does not know the results of this research. However, the teacher's familiarity with the study is evident throughout the paper. Due to the study's findings, the teacher altered her speech in the classroom by using less alternative questions, more wh-questions and less interruptions.

APPENDIX A

The student was not able to explain why the Hmong do not eat green vegetables during the New Year celebration.

285. teacher: Do you know why ...the-they don't eat vegetables at this time? Is it because the meat and the rice ars so good? Or? Do you know the reason?
286. student: Yes, um at ...I don't know where but my mother and father they told me so um eat um green vegetable.
287. teacher: Um hum
288. student: So, in my country they were farmer.
289. teacher: Um hum
290. student: So, if you eat em green vegetable. So when you...grow the rice, right?
291. teacher: Um hum
292. student: You grow the rice and um grow the corn and everything.
293. teacher: Uh hum
294. student: you grow on the farm.
295. teacher: Um hum
296. student: They say something. Eat if ya in the new year and in the holiday xxx on the three day.
297. teacher: Uh hum
298. student: in the new year. So you eat um green vegeta- vegetable. So you have ummaybe in your farms you have um a large glass re then.
299. teacher: grass?
300. student: Yeah
301. teacher: Um hum
302. student: a large grass and some... um a grass grass shopper, right? They cut it.
303. teacher: They cut the grass uh huh.
304. student: They cut it and rice and um everything. Oh we grow in the farm.
305. teacher: Um hum
306. student: So they um they don't have to eat.
307. teacher: Uh hum
308. student: Some if you if you eat that in your farm some, maybe do like that then lady um old men so they say is true. So because I seen before.
309. teacher: Uh hum
310. student: If you don't believe so you eat right? Then when you grow the rice eh the farm
311. teacher: Uh hum
312. student: So you have a a lot mouth. So then mouth
313. teacher: Mmm?
314. student: like a dead in this muth mouth the um in the houth (house) in
315. teacher: mice?
316. student: Yeah
317. teacher: li-little animals?
318. student: Yeah, the animals. And they cut the rice and everything so...in the farm.
319. teacher: Um hum
320. student: They have
321. teacher: Mmm
322. student: many many thing.
323. teacher: Thi-this kind of a thing? Um (draws picture of a mouse)
324. student: Yeah? Heh

325. teacher: a mouse?  
326. student: yeah  
327. teacher: O.K.  
328. student: and and the grey supper. A lot of they cut it rice and the corn um something else um young (?) grow in the farm.  
329. teacher: Um hum  
330. student: They say that sort of uh old lady and old young old men say that they don't give enough people to eat the green vegetable.  
331. teacher: Um hum  
332. student: so that was...maybe um they make up from the China because um they  
333. teacher: You think it might of come this idea  
334. student: yeah  
335. teacher: came from China?  
336. student: yeah. Maybe um three...in the order (older?) or uh (laugh)  
337. teacher: Um hum  
338. student: or the lie or the month before.  
339. teacher: Um hum  
340. student: they do from

## The Teacher's Use of Comprehension Checks

391. teacher: O.K. I will see you on Friday morning.  
392. student: Friday morning?  
393. teacher: Yes, we have a test in B  
394. student: So  
395. teacher: Same room.  
396. student: O.K.  
397. teacher: same time. Nine o'clock.  
398. student: O.K.  
399. teacher: On Friday morning  
400. student: O.K.  
401. teacher: I'll see you Friday morning O.K.?  
402. student: O.K.  
403. teacher: Just be about an hour. O.K.?  
404. student: O.K.  
405. teacher: alright, take care.  
406. student: Bye-Bye, Thank you  
407. JL : take care. Good luck.  
408. student: O.K. Bye  
409. teacher: Your number ---, Remember that.  
410. student: O.K.  
411. teacher: Alright (laugh)

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