

Small Group Interaction and Ways of Persuading in Multinational Groups of Students

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Abstract

The aim of my presentation is to study small-group interaction of the university students role-playing in given debate situations. The study is part of a wider research project which was carried out at the University of Kuopio, Finland, spring of 2006. The goal of this project is to investigate multinational students' abilities to influence through language, argumentation strategies, and coping skills using English in demanding foreign language situations. For all students English was their first foreign language, i.e. their lingua franca (ELF). In most European countries English has established itself as the language of academic communities and business communication (Jenkins, 2007).

The study belongs to the field of social semiotics and applied linguistics and the method used in this analysis is based on discourse analytical theory by Halliday. The data consist of 8 videorecorded debates, in which multinational students studying Public Health at the University of Kuopio played the roles of either 'proponent' or 'opponent' of the given theme. The debates were analyzed by studying the argumentation strategies used in supporting or refuting the arguments. Participation framework, i.e. the length of the turns of individual speakers revealed the use of power in interaction (Tannen, 1991). The problems which occurred were mainly insufficient vocabulary, difficult topic, and cultural differences (Fairclough, 2006). The object of persuasion is to change beliefs and attitudes. The methods of persuading were analyzed and the small-group dynamics were investigated (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). In addition, multimodal features, such as gestures, the use of assertive voice, pitch, and intonation were studied (van Leeuwen, 2005). Furthermore, emotional appeals and threats being effective tools in enhancing the strength of persuasion were analyzed. With my study I want to demonstrate the increasing need for versatile foreign language pedagogy at the university level. Awareness of the increasing demands of language proficiency set by globalization promotes this need.

Key words: persuasion, small group interaction, collaborative strategy

The aim of my presentation is to clarify the features revealed in the analysis of small group interaction in multinational university students' debates. The study is part of a wider research project carried out at the University of Kuopio, Finland. The goal of the project is to investigate the argumentation skills and the ways of influencing through language among university students. The study belongs to the field of socio- and applied linguistics, pragmatics and social semiotics. My approach is based on the discourse analytical theory developed by Halliday (1978). The purpose of this presentation is to clarify students' behaviour in multinational small group interaction and their ways of persuading their fellow students in given roles in debate situations. The purpose of the study is to obtain new perspectives for foreign language pedagogy at universities and other educational institutions.

1. BACKGROUND

My personal interest in university students' discursive and interactional skills and behaviour was awakened at the University of Kuopio while teaching ESP (English for Specific Purposes) to the students of different disciplines in the 1980s and 1990s. The students were advanced readers of difficult texts but their oral skills were often very poor and as speakers in communication situations they were very reserved and inhibited. In the academic settings of the globalizing world English has become the language of instruction and communication. For most speakers, English is the first foreign language, the lingua franca. My purpose was to organize a demanding linguistic situation, in which the students would have to manage in given roles in English. Debating demands interactional and discursive skills and particularly so, when implemented in a foreign language. My aim was to ascertain what kinds of strategies the students would have and what kinds of group skills they would have.

2. DATA AND METHODS

The empirical part of the study was implemented at the University of Kuopio, Finland in spring 2006. The subjects consisted of multinational graduate students of Public Health (N=33), both Finnish (21) and foreign (12) students. The students had taken part in a two-semester course dealing with the most important themes within the field of the Public Health, and the language of the course had been English. For all students, English was the first foreign language, i.e. English as a lingua franca (ELF). The students had been informed that the final session of the course would include participation in a debate dealing with one of the essential themes of the Public Health course which would be videorecorded. The students were first divided into four groups, each of which was further split into two sub-groups, 'for' and 'against'. Finally, the small groups consisted of four groups of proponents and four groups of opponents. The students did not know the topic of the debate until they entered the videoing studio. Each subgroup consisted of 4 - 5 members. In each group there was at least one foreign student. Four debates, two on each topic were videorecorded. The course leader of the MPH-course had chosen two topics for the debates, viz.

1. *Restriction of alcohol under the age of eighteen encourages young people to alcohol abuse'*
2. *Abstinence is the best solution to avoid HIV/AIDS.*

The average length of the debates was 11 minutes. Participation framework gives information of the length of individual speakers' turns.

The debates were transcribed and analyzed. Analysis of the debates and cultural differences will be presented later in this paper.

2.1. Theoretical Background and Previous Research

Due to my long experience of teaching Finnish university students, younger students and adults and a long experience of assessing national language tests, my approach is pragmatic. In pragmatics, the interest lies in the use of language in various situations, language usage and the functions of language. The research interest lies in the language user and in the event, in what is said, how it is said and what is the result. The term pragmatics was coined by Charles Morris in 1938. According to him, the pragmatic perspective provides insight to the connection between language and human life in general. Hence, pragmatics is also the link between linguistics and the rest of humanities and social sciences.

Charles Peirce (1839-1914) with his theory of signs was one of the first founding figures of semiotics. His theory of representation and meaning indicates that he understood the dynamic influence of the language. He was primarily oriented toward communication rather than language.

Austin's speech act theory (1962) emphasized the role of the speaker, the functional meaning of the utterance and the effect of the message on the hearer. Searle (1969) developed Austin's speech act theory further, but his loose, formal verbs have been criticized. Grice (1975) emphasized the importance of collaboration in conversation, calling it the Cooperative Principle, and pointed out that all interactants should cooperate in the conversation by contributing to the ongoing speech event.

Earlier studies of this project have concentrated on the research of argumentation strategies in ELF (English used as a lingua franca) debates. Anna Mauranen (2003) has conducted versatile research on the use of ELF in academic settings and according to her findings the most frequently used strategies were repetition, rephrasing, restructuring, and topic negotiation. The same features were found out in this study. A clear strategy of collaboration (Grice 1975, Mauranen 2003) was prevailing in all debates.

My main interest in the present study focuses on small group interaction and on the behaviour of the small group members during the interaction. Group dynamics is the area of social sciences that focuses on advancing knowledge about the nature of group life. Kurt Lewin (1944), one of the most important psychologists of the twentieth century, was the first scientist who first launched the idea of the importance of group dynamics. Group dynamics deals with the nature of groups, behaviour of groups, development and interrelations between groups and individuals. Knowledge of group dynamics has the potential to change the way we think about groups and larger entities (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Group dynamics is essential to human existences, as humans are small group beings. All groups have a basic structure that

includes roles and norms. Group productivity depends on five basic elements: positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, appropriate use of social skills and group processing.

2.2. Small Group Interaction

Groups are ubiquitous in our lives, and it is inevitable that we belong to many groups. Generally, a small group is two or more individuals in face-to-face interaction, each aware of his or her positive interdependence and each aware of the others who belong to the group. In the present study, the small groups consisted of 4 - 5 students.

Communication is the basis for all human interaction and for all group functioning. Effective communication is a prerequisite for every aspect of group functioning. Group communication may be defined as a message sent by a group member to one or more receivers with the conscious intent of affecting the receivers' behaviour (Johnson, 2006). Any signal aimed at influencing the receiver's behaviour in any way is communication. Effective communication exists among group members when the receivers interpret the sender's message in the same way as the sender intended it (Johnson, 2006).

Communication among group members may be examined by using various patterns of observation. One of the most famous systems is the equilibrium theory, developed by Bales (1953). He posited that effective groups must maintain a balance between task and socio-emotional activity and developed an observation system known as interaction process analysis (IPA) to analyze the interaction among group members (Johnson & Johnson, 2006).

The interaction among group members may be analyzed on three levels. The first level is the relative frequency and length of communication acts — who talked, how often, and for how long. This level was applied in the analysis of the present study.

The second level is who communicates to whom. The third level is who triggers whom in what ways (Johnson & Johnson, 2006). In the present study, each debate situation consisted of two groups, 'for' and 'against'. There should be a balance in communication during the debates. Participation framework, which will be dealt with later in Chapter 4 (Results), reveals the relation of the use of turns and power relations in the debate situations.

For any problem-solving group to be effective, the members first have to obtain the necessary information to solve the problem. The integration of members' information, ideas, experiences, and opinions is an essential part of problem-solving in a group. How successfully group members integrate their resources depends to a large extent on three factors: (1) their sending and receiving skills, (2) the group norms about and procedures for communicating, and (3) the pattern of communication among group members. According to Johnson & Johnson, the influences on communication effectiveness include cooperative versus collaborative context, group norms, physical barriers, seating arrangements, and humour.

In the present study, instructions were given at the same time as the topics for the debate. There was no chairperson or moderator in the studio. Roles define the formal structure of the group and differentiate one group from another. Roles ensure that the task behaviours of group members are interrelated appropriately so that the group's goals are achieved.

Seating arrangements were determined by the division into 'for' and 'against' groups so that the microphones were placed in front of both groups and the videorecording could be

implemented without any hindrances. All groups were multinational. The foreign students were mixed in the group with Finnish students and the African male students were sitting in the middle of both groups. For some reason they had seated in that way, they were not told to do so. While observing videoed debates, it is easy to see that this seating arrangement had a hindering effect on white female students, particularly when the topic of the debate dealt with delicate themes, as e.g. the theme of HIV/AIDS and the sexual life of the students.

2.3. Culture and Communication

A brief and very concise definition of culture states that 'culture consists of learned and shared values, beliefs, and behaviours of a group of interacting people'. Studies of culture include many sectors of life, viz. communication styles, concept of time, the interface of power and politeness in disagreements, etc. Globalization has created a vast literature dealing with various aspects of culture and communication. The need for training educators in various fields has inspired researchers to investigate many interesting features of cultural differences in different fields of society..

In his book 'Language and Globalization' (2006), Norman Fairclough distinguishes five main agencies for his analysis of globalization: 1) academic, 2) governmental, 3) nongovernmental, 4) media, and 5) people in everyday life. In this study, the approach refers to academic level and to people's communication in everyday life.

Issues are treated on individual, collective or universal level. Edward T. Hall in his book '*Beyond Culture*' (1976) divides the countries of the world to two different main groups: those with high-context culture and those with low-context cultures. His theory refers to a culture's tendency to use high-context messages over low-context messages in routine communication. In a high-context culture many things are left unsaid, letting the culture explain. Words and word choice become very important in higher-context communication. Communication is indirect, there are plenty of implicit messages and monologues, and communication aims at face-saving. The culture may be characterized as listening culture of communication. High-context culture can be described as collective culture, and it is the culture of the eastern world.

Low-context culture is explicit, direct, intimate and empathic. It is based on speaking, on both individual communication and dialogues. Low-context culture is mainly represented by the western world, the US, Scandinavia, Britain, and Germany. It is dangerous to use strict stereotypes and generalizations, but understanding the broad tendencies of predominant cultures of this world can help us inform and understand communication between individuals of differing cultures.

Tolerance of silence is one characteristic which differs in various cultures. In low-context cultures, silence is experienced as very embarrassing, whereas in high-context cultures the group members can tolerate long pauses in communication. In Finnish communication, silence is a normal feature. Many Finnish proverbs reveal that silence has been an essential part of Finnish life. «Speaking is silver, silence gold» demonstrates the appreciation of silent culture. Aino Sallinen-Kuparinen was the first researcher in Finland who studied this phenomenon in her dissertation 'Finnish Communication Reticence' (1986).

In nonverbal communication as well, there are differences between different countries. Motor habits of groups of people are culturally determined, although emotions have universal

modes of expressions. The term of nonverbal communication is most frequently used to refer to all the ways in which communication is effected between persons in each other's presence, by means of other than words. It refers to the communicational functioning of bodily activity, gestures, facial expressions and orientation, posture and spacing, touch and smell, and to those aspects or utterances that can be considered apart from the referential content of what is said (Kendon. 1980). Facial expressions are culturally determined and e.g. face should be divided into three relatively independent expressive areas: gaze, eyebrow position and mouth position. Nonverbal communication forms an essential part of interactional communication and its effects are worth studying, because awareness of the differences helps in cross-cultural communication.

The use of voice, intonation, pitch, speech rhythm and speed are important areas to be studied in cultural communication. The vocal features and other multimodal aspects will be analyzed more detailed later in another paper

2.4. Power

The groups should be given equal possibilities to create balanced, effective and positive climate for successful interaction and collaboration. Power can be given by the language and by many other factors which will be dealt with later.

2.4.1. Power and Language

The concept of language has been connected with power since the antique times. Language is one of the most obvious means through which power is exercised. Power research has focused rather one-sidedly on linguistic content and it has neglected other factors, such as body orientation, speech rate, pitch, fluency, patterns of eye gaze and other facial expressions, and distance and seating arrangements during the interaction. Ng and Bradac (1993) argue that

- language reveals power,
- language creates power,
- language reflects power, and
- language obscures or depoliticizes power

Fairclough (1989, 1992, 2006) has done extensive research on the notion of the interconnectedness of language and power in society. He explains the «existing conventions as the outcome of power relations and power struggle» (Fairclough, 1989). Fairclough distinguishes power *in* and *behind* discourse. Power *in* discourse deals with the actual exercise of power. According to Fairclough, power *in* discourse is to do with powerful participants *controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants*. It is useful to distinguish broadly between three types of such constraints, viz.

- *contents*, what is said or done;
- *relations*, the social relations people enter into in discourse;
- *subjects*, or the 'subject positions' people can occupy.

In discourse types, as e.g. in ‘doctor - student’ teaching situation, the more powerful participant can choose the discourse type, e.g. give direct orders and questions, power is in discourse and less powerful participants are in a subordinate relation to doctor. In these cases, the status gives the powerful speaker the right to take their role.

Power behind discourse refers to how relations of power shape and constitute the social orders of social institutions or societies (Fairclough, 1989). Media discourse is a good example of present day hidden persuasive discourse. In conflict situations and in disagreements in oral communication, the use of power may play the decisive role.

2.4.2. *Power and Status*

Status can be defined as an individual’s position in the structure of social relationships with respect to other individuals. Position may be determined in a number of ways, through education, institutional position, wealth, age, sex, etc. or by the possession of specific mental or physical abilities (Watts, 1991).

In history, status in society was very strongly determined by wealth rank in society, and by church. Ordinary people did not have power to introduce their opinions. Nowadays, in most democratic societies people have freedom to speak in many forums. Status is linked to ‘the degree in which her/his own self-image or positive face corresponds to the perceptions of the other members’ (Watts, 1991). Status can be gained or lost during interaction, for example, by confirming a topic or refusing to accept a topic.

The use of power has been studied in different surroundings: in families (Watts, 1991), Tannen, 1990), in institutions (Diamond, 1996), in politics and in religious contexts. Diamond points out that ‘institutionalized status alone does not account for the relative power and political effectiveness of the members’ (1996). She defines «status as rank ascribed to individuals either on the basis of birth (such as sex, age, nationality, race) i.e. without reference to abilities, or achieved through individual effort» (1996). Diamond calls the first part of her definition *institutional rank* and the second *local rank*.

Status differences between interactants are intuitively recognized as having an influence on linguistic output. Berger (1994) describes studies showing that the *perception* of status differences between interactants influences their body language and linguistic behaviour. It is a common assumption that people with higher status hold this rank for a reason such as competence or expertise. They are therefore expected to be and tolerated as more dominant.

The phenomenon of politeness has captivated researchers in linguistics for a long time. The *face-saving view* of politeness by Brown and Levinson (1987) is one of the most influential works on politeness. The idea of ‘face-saving’ was initially launched by Erving Goffman, a manysided linguist and microsociologist (1967). He studied face-saving in interactional face-saving situations of society and developed a frame analysis where all interaction situations were put into frames according to the context.

In a debate situation, all participants have a different status (Miettinen & Torkki, 2008). The participants have either high or low interactional status. Many factors create the status in the group and once the status has been adopted, it is difficult to change it. Communication in the group is based on the status of each speaker. Status expression, as the researchers call it, is a very decisive factor for the success of the communication.

2.5. Persuasion

The aim of persuasive talk includes two factors: 1) reversing the old belief and conviction and 2) giving good reasons to build a new belief or opinion. The role of the speaker is the most decisive in the process of persuasion (Walter, 1966). As early as in Aristotle times, the nature of the speaker, his/her ethos was considered to be the most important means of persuasion. Walter divides the power of persuasion into three parts, viz. 1) rhetorical logic, 2) use of emotion and motivation, and 3) the speaker, his/her 'ethos'. What are the factors that make one speaker more persuasive than the others? Certain people, like politicians and clergymen, have privileged positions, and it is partly their reputation that creates and develops their ethos and makes it easier for them to be persuasive. What the speaker chooses to say, the way he puts it, his/her supporting material, organization, choice of words and grammar, attitudes and methods, gestures and mannerisms, the minimal cues, the way his/her ethos is revealed, all these factors together influence his/her audience and make him/her a more or less persuasive speaker.

Furthermore, persuasive effectiveness depends on the speaker's use of emotional appeals. Promises and threats both on rhetorical and emotional level belong to the strongest means of persuasion. Correct and effective use of assertive voice, intonation, stressing and gestures emphasize the effect of persuasive talk. In political rhetoric, the 'Rule of three' is an effective structural device in order to strengthen the persuasion.

3. RESULTS

The results of the study indicate that the students managed fairly well in persuasive small group interaction. The first speaker was a student from group 'For' in two debates, and from group 'Against' in two debates. He/she started by repeating the theme of the debate and clearly giving the first argument on behalf of the group, e.g. 'We think that', 'We are of the opinion that'. The themes were treated in a logical way and argumentation and counter-argumentation was organized. Initiating, sustaining and terminating argumentation was used and the turns were mainly short. Some of the foreign students, e.g. African and Chinese students had longer turns than the Finnish students. Cultural differences were clearly apparent in the argumentation. In some debates, the students used more interruptions than the others. The strategies consisted of questions, repeated questions ('what's wrong with the restriction?'), word choice (yeah but, but, do you REALLY think that), assertive use of voice, head nods and gesticulations. Humour is an effective tool in interaction, when used correctly. It was used both in problematic language situations (Help me! A student while searching the proper word) and as a means to finish the debate ('I think you've beaten us'). Cultural differences were part of themes treated. — The problems were due to insufficient vocabulary or difficult topics of the debates.

The use of power in debates is demonstrated by the participation framework. Those students who used plenty of time and did not let the others interrupt, clearly used the power more than the others.

In all debates, the first speaker, who had made the initial remark, kept his/her leader-role during the debate. A strong strategy of collaboration was to be seen during all debates. As to

the amount of opinion change produced, it is difficult to say, because the students stuck to their roles in the group and wanted to keep their role opinion till the end.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicate that the university students managed fairly well in their roles in the debates. The students understood the challenge that the roles in the debates gave to them, they were committed and, both consciously and unconsciously, applied collaborative strategy in defending their views or while opposing to the views of the opponent group. The data give insights for foreign language pedagogy at universities and other educational institutions.

Consciousness of the effectiveness of languages is of utmost importance in the globalizing world (Fairclough, 2006). This is why teaching of the ways of influencing through language is so important, particularly in the academic world.

Knowledge of group skills and methods of persuasion are valuable abilities and can be taught and learned at schools. In all levels of education, information of cultural differences and teaching of adaptability to the changing multicultural society should be part of curricula. In addition, intercultural and negotiation skills will be needed more and more in all situations of life and should be taught at schools.

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