

A Communication Accommodation Analysis of Teacher-Student Interaction in an ESL Classroom

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Abstract

During interactions in the classroom, most teachers and students make a conscious effort to avoid common mistakes in speaking of English language and therefore adopt certain strategies to communicate effectively. The study aims to determine the communication strategies teachers and students adopt to adjust their communication during classroom interaction. The study applies the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) to analyse teacher-student interactions in an ESL classroom. Data were sampled from 360 recordings of classroom teaching from three English teachers in a Senior High School in the Agona East District in Ghana. It was revealed that strategies such as convergence and divergence were adopted by both teachers and students for a smooth discourse.

1.0 Introduction

Generally, people communicate with one another in all contexts and intentionally change their communication style, whether it be verbal or nonverbal, or do so unconsciously. For instance, in a doctor's office, a doctor and patient adjust their language to understand each other. Another context that is very relatable to almost everyone is the communication between the teachers and their students. An instance is when teachers in language classes, fuse simpler structures and terminologies as they consider the level of their students to ease learning for the learners.

It therefore becomes necessary to speak more or less formally, when to speak quickly or slowly, and in a variety of other situations are just a few

examples of the many other situations in which everyone uses speech daily.

Research on Communication Accommodation Theory (hereafter CAT), which strategies include convergence, and divergence, as well as the reasons for which these strategies are used by interlocutors to enhance or facilitate their interactions in various contexts, have got researchers directed their attention toward it in recent decades due to the rise in migration and intercultural contact. When an immigrant arrives in a new country to begin their new life, they may encounter a variety of issues that need to be resolved. One of the biggest issues that many immigrants run into is the target country's language, which can be spoken or non-spoken.

For example, a Ghanaian immigrant in America may have to adjust his accent or maintain it to communicate effectively. On the other hand, though English is spoken widely in Ghana, an immigrant who does not have any idea about any Ghanaian language, gestures, cultures, customs, and many others, may struggle to communicate with native speakers, so to interact with them, this person needs to learn their language. As a result, some native speakers may be aware of the person's limited language skills and simplify their speech (consciously or unconsciously). This may lead to the choice of using more body language, simpler words, and slower speech, while other groups may act oppositely and speak more quickly and with more complex grammar structures due to different reasons.

Communication between teachers and students in an ESL classroom is important, as has been recorded by language teaching researchers such as (Long, 1983; Swain, 2005; Ellis, 2008). Language input, language output, classroom setting, student evaluations, and involvement in educational activities are all influenced by rational classroom interaction, which supports the efficiency of acquiring a language and developing one's competence. Numerous studies have examined various techniques and tactics to encourage interaction in ESL classrooms over the past ten years, but very few have concentrated on what actually occurs in ESL classrooms and how interactions are conducted

there. This study, therefore, aims to investigate actual teacher-student accommodation strategies during interactions in ESL classrooms according to the theory of communication accommodations. It does so by elaborating on how teachers employ these strategies to make accommodations for the students during interactions to prevent the challenges encountered in instructional settings.

1.1 Interaction in an ESL Setting

Ellis (2008), avers that acquisition of language and its learning provides learners with a great deal of language abilities. In agreement with Ellis, language learning and acquisition indeed help students become fluent in the language of study. Therefore, as with studying any other language, a new language can thus be effectively learned in both informal and formal settings.

Language acquisition researchers attribute language environment, linguistic input, and linguistic output as contributing factors influencing a language learner's proficiency as well as performance (Leslie & Howard, 1984; Swain, 2005; Ellis, 2008). Mackey (1999) also notes that instructors must create a learning environment that is very interactive in their language classes and encourages meaning generation and negotiation within the intended language. Thus, in a classroom context, interaction is essential to language learning. Ellis (2005) defined interaction as natural and structured verbal and nonverbal exchanges that occur during formal drilling. This is similar to the claim by Ninio & Snow (1996). In the opinion of Ninio and Snow (1996), to be successful in learning and acquiring language, students must be actively involved in communication during a language classroom setting. Jin, Singh, & Li (2005) also posit that creating a conducive learning environment and designing lessons that motivate students to actively participate in information negotiation and sharing are a teacher's key responsibilities in the classroom. Classroom interaction is one of the main tenets of communicative language teaching, which highlights the change in the role of teachers from information providers to language learning facilitators. Following the communicative

language teaching concept, students' lack of language proficiency is a direct result of the teaching method (Widdowson, 1972).

To develop the essential communicative competencies, teachers must employ a range of instructional strategies to promote students' unrestricted interaction, including grammatical competence, sociolinguistics competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence as noted by Canale & Swain (1980).

2. Theoretical Underpinning

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), was formerly known as Speech Accommodation Theory (SAT). It is a theory of interpersonal communication and was propounded by Giles in 1973. Giles notes that to achieve the following three main objectives, that is to cause social approval, to develop communication effectiveness and to sustain a positive sense of self, interlocutors either voluntarily or involuntarily adjust their verbal and nonverbal behaviours to accommodate one another: (Beebe & Giles, 1984; Giles et al., 1991).

The fundamental communication strategies of “Convergence and divergence” between individuals are key to CAT according to Giles et al. (1991) and Giles (2012). According to Giles (2012), "convergence" is a strategy individuals use to adapt their verbal and non-verbal communicative behaviours to demonstrate their similarity to their speakers and elicit praise or approval from the audience, or the conversation advancement. Convergence is frequently seen in a broad spectrum of behaviours, including non-verbal ones like smiling and gesturing as well as verbal ones like changing pronunciation, word choice, sentence length, rate of speech, pausing that occur, giving clarification, repetition that may occur and even, changing languages (Coupland, 1980). Giles et al (2005) classified communication accommodation strategies into five categories: approximation, interpretability, discourse management, emotional expression, and interpersonal control. Conversely, divergence is intended to draw attention to and emphasize the differences between interlocutors,

as opposed to convergence, which is a type of adjustment meant to facilitate and show more similarities between communicators.

2.1 Researches on Communication Accommodation

There have been numerous studies that have applied the “Communication Accommodation Theory”. Communication Accommodation Theory identifies communication accommodation and there have been studies on communication using the tenets of CAT. CAT has been applied in the home between mother-daughter relationships (Mahanita 2013), step-parents and step-children’s relationships (Speer and Giles 2013), business meetings (Garner 2010), in the field of law enforcement (Hajek et al. 2008) and the health care industries (Watson and Gallois 1998, Hewett et al 2015 and Erwin et al 2015)

CAT has also not been distanced from classroom interaction. For instance, Manju (2015) examines the efficiency of adjustment in communication which occurs in the English classroom setting and finds out that teachers employed convergence strategies such as managing the discourse to have control over students or create productive interactions. In contrast, these English instructors employed divergence procedures to preserve favourable social identification whilst Yi-Rung and Wenli (2015) investigated the causes that influence teachers' use of accommodation strategies in ESL classrooms. The study revealed that six accommodation strategies were employed and these included: introducing, defining, listing, eliciting, illustrating, and emphasizing. These techniques were caused by the difficulty of the input materials, student feedback, and the teacher's and student's language proficiency. Again, the study on teacher and older student interactions in Taiwan's senior education, by Chin-Hui (2019) focused on speech accommodation techniques. The findings were that when speaking with senior citizens, teachers use code-switching, talking incoherently, refraining from discussing illness or death, and being polite.

In the African context, Ansah and Lomotey (2022) investigated language regulation in an ESL classroom practice in some Ghanaian

Senior High Schools. The study found that educators did not follow their students' speech patterns that is they used divergence strategies to constrict the range of acceptable behaviour or converged toward them to give them the proper input to follow while taking communication accommodation into account.

Whilst Ansah & Lomotey (2022) look at language regulation in the ESL classroom, this study aims to investigate how teachers and students both adjust to each other during instructional hours in the ESL setting and also seeks to contribute to the available literature in the African setting. Weizheng (2019), having found out that, most students in China were unable to gain the desired level of fluency in English even though they have received a formal education in the English language, decided to investigate to identify the underlying challenges. The study focused on what communication accommodation strategies teachers used in their classrooms and it was revealed that the teachers who were sampled for the study used approximation, interpretability, and emotion expression to make students understand the subject matter during the interaction. Weizheng's (2019) study is therefore directly related to the current study as it explores the tenets of communication accommodation theory.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Approach and Design

The study adopted a qualitative approach because the researcher is interested in understanding how teachers and students use their experiences to accommodate each other in a classroom situation. A qualitative case study design is also employed because it allows the researcher to explore the participants' experiences without generalizations.

3.1.1 Participants and Sampling Method

The participants were three English teachers and 105 students from three different classes in a selected Senior High School in the Agona East District in the Central region of Ghana. These classes are made up of a

Visual Art class, a Business class and a Home Economics class. The class sizes were 58, 12 and 35 respectively with an average of 16 years. The teachers selected were English teachers in the school. They have worked for at least ten years. They are forty years and above and are referred to as TI, TII and TIII in the analysis. Both teachers and students are non-native English speakers and have English as their L2 with diverse cultural backgrounds from the various ethnic groups of Ghana. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the teachers because the study focuses on ESL. Again, the researcher used a convenience sampling method to select the school out of the four Senior High Schools in the district due to the willingness and readiness of the school to participate in the research and proximity on the part of the researcher.

3.1.2 Data Collection

300 minutes of ESL classroom interaction was captured on video with the consent of the three teachers. There were altogether two sections each for a teacher. The topics for discussion included, Concord, Literary devices and Nouns with a revision exercise class. In the analysis, “S” stands for student, “AS” represents all of the students, and “SS” also stands for some of the students. The sign (---) indicates the lengthening of sound or words. Giles et al (2005) classified communication accommodation strategies into five categories: approximation, interpretability, discourse management, emotional expression, and interpersonal control. Some of these categories were applied to the transcription, coding, and qualitative analysis of the video samples.

3. 2 Data Presentation and Discussions

Accommodation occurs in all forms of interaction, according to Özlem (2015). Ansah & and Lomotey (2022) note that conditions of interactions in the classroom are negotiated by the interlocutors’ accuracy and acceptability of the language. When boundaries are drawn between what should be viewed as appropriate or correct and what goes beyond those boundaries or is deemed inaccurate, this negotiation can be made explicit.

Ansah and Lomotey added that it must be understood that explicitly evaluating another participant's language by correcting their language reveals the participant's understanding of language and their ability to judge what goes beyond what is appropriate.

In excerpt 1, TI was teaching concord (subject-verb agreement) and outlined the rules where a subject must agree with the verb. She uses discourse management as a convergence strategy. According to Farzadnia and Gile (2015), Discourse management strategies pertain to the adjustment of communication based on the perceived or stated conversational needs of the other interlocutor.

Teachers manage discourse by questioning, modelling, repetition, clarification, prompting and giving feedback whilst students manage discourse through active listening, participation, asking questions, self-reflection and many others. The following excerpt illustrates discourse management as a convergence strategy by TI

Excerpt 1 (TI)

TI: ... ye---s (Asking students to mention some examples she wrote on the board)

S1: someone

TI: someone

S2: nobody

TI: nobody

As seen in the data, TI uses questioning and repetition to manage discourse in the classroom. This is seen as a convergence strategy as it allows the teacher to give correct feedback to students. The repetition in this context is feedback confirming the accuracy of the answer. Prompting as a discourse management was also employed in the classroom interaction. This strategy is used by teachers as a pre-preparation towards the topic to be learnt. This is seen in excerpt two by TII.

Excerpt 2 (TII)

TII: ... ok, we are going to look at nouns, after the nouns, we shall look at gender. I said we shall look at gender. I said we shall look at what we call wha---t?

AS: Gender (raising their voices above the expectation of the teacher)

TII: you are shouting. We shall look at what we call wha---t?

AS: gender. (Students lower their voices)

Wait-time in classroom interaction helps teachers accommodate their students as it helps them to allow students to think critically and or repeat utterances after them for emphasis. Wait-time refers to the pause a teacher allows between posing a question and expecting an answer or between a student's answer and the teacher's response according to Rowe (1974) as seen in the lengthening of the word “wha---t?” in the above excerpt.

Turn-taking is a discourse management in a classroom interaction which allows students to participate actively in classroom discourse. Students' discourse management includes listening participating and answering questions. These strategies employed by both students and teachers allow each party to adjust their communication. Turn-taking is illustrated by the following example.

Excerpt 3(T III)

TIII: ... so, let's look at the topics. The first one is what, ye--s

S1: rhetorical question

TIII: rhetorical question ye---s. what again?

S2: synecdoche

TIII: synecdoche

S3: oxymoron

Emotional strategy as a convergence strategy was employed to show teachers' affection towards students. This strategy creates a friendly atmosphere in a classroom situation. An example is found in excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4 (TII)

TII: ... You don't sound like you are doing well.
AS: sir we are hungry
TII: ... alright, it shall be well, God will provide.
AS: Okay

Excerpt 5 (TII)

TII: Ye- -s, erm! Lizzy.
S2: A noun is a name of a person ...
TII: Louder plea--se
S2: (Raises the voice higher) A noun is a name of a person ...
TII: I didn't say you should shout
S2: (Lowering her voice) Animal, place or a thing....

From excerpt 5, the approximation strategy is used by TII. Approximation strategies according to Farzadnia and Giles (2015), refer to making one's language and communication patterns more similar or dissimilar from another. It is observed from excerpt 5 that the teacher controls his student's utterance to be similar to his way of speaking by ordering her not to speak louder. This strategy was also adopted by TIII in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 6 (T III)

TIII: Ok. I mentioned antithesis. So, let's start with a rhetorical question.
S: it's a (speaks undertone)
TIII: let everybody hear

Another convergence strategy is interpersonal control strategies which refer to how individuals adapt communication based on role relations, relative power, and status. The following excerpt illustrates this:

Excerpt 7 (TII)

TII: Alright. Anybody with idea of a nou---n? Anybody with idea of a nou---n? (A student raises her hand). Ye---s madam

S: (changes her accent to a native-like accent) A noun is a name of a person or an animal....

AS: (Laugh)

From the excerpt, TII could have said “Louder” without adding “**please**”. Based on his social status, he is superior to his students and culturally, he could command his students but as noted by Brown and Levison (1987), commands are negative politeness and may threaten the face of the hearer and so TII adds please which may minimize the level of face threatening. “Ye---s madam” is also a politeness strategy identified from TII in the excerpt. “**Madam**” as an honorific is used by TII as a face-saving act as well. Thus, TII converges downwards to his students to attain a friendly environment. On the other hand, it can be observed that the student in this excerpt uses a divergence strategy. One may argue that she uses an approximation strategy as she tries to converge to a native speaker but in this context, the teacher and all other students are non-native speakers of English so this behaviour is considered as divergence.

According to Giles & Ogay (2007:295), “Among the different accommodative strategies that speakers use to achieve these goals, convergence has been the most extensively studied – and can be considered the historical core of CAT”. The data presented so far manifest this assertion. On the other hand, the divergence strategy is seen in excerpt 7. In addition, this strategy was also revealed by T III in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 8 (T III)

TIII: And then wha--t? near, **neary** in meaning

SS: (laugh)

TIII: Ei! Please allow “na brɔ fo yɛ dru”

AS: Nearly in meaning

It is observed that the use of divergence in this excerpt by the teacher is to make his students aware that he does not belong to the linguistic group and for that matter, he is bound to make mistakes, with the utterance “na brɔ fo ye dru” literally means English is heavy. This means that divergence in this context is not necessarily a refusal to accommodate but to express attribution and feelings. However, TI uses a divergence strategy to strictly enforce the rule on the subject-verb agreement is strictly adhered to in excerpt 9.

Excerpt 9 (TI)

S: all of them

AS: (laughs)

TI: No. All of them is not correct

AS: (laughs)

TI: so, the second rule is saying that anytime you use this, the verb that should follow it, should be singular. Are you clear?

AS: yes

4.0 Conclusion

The study showed that communication accommodation is necessary in the ESL classroom setting. English teachers try to adjust themselves to promote smooth and successful interaction to encourage the students to participate in the teaching and learning activities and foster an environment of equality and harmony. Convergence strategies were adopted the most. These convergence strategies included discourse management, approximation, emotional expressions, and interpersonal control. Discourse management techniques like turn-taking, prompting, questioning, and participation, answering questions were adopted by teachers and students respectively.

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