

A Study on Communication Breakdowns between Native and Non-native Speakers in English Speaking Classes

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ABSTRACT

English majored students have a positive influence on intercultural awareness in learning a foreign language. In their classes, they are often asked to discuss some academic matters in British cultural beliefs. Although they have a high level of proficiency in English communication, there often encountered misunderstandings between them when they interpret things or present academic matters. As a result, students cannot achieve plurilingual and pluricultural competence in the course. This paper was conducted to investigate communication problems between Vietnamese learners of English and Native teachers at HUPI. The data were collected from 28 participants who are third-year students and four different lecturers from different countries. The findings revealed that sources were mainly clustered for the following reasons: perceptual and language differences, information overload, inattention time pressures, distraction/noise emotions, complexity in organizational structure, and poor retention. The perceptual and language differences, information overload, and emotions were mainly responsible for the quality of communication. This paper can help students engage in awareness-raising activities that promote understanding in some contacts and discussions.

1. Introduction

English is an important language that is used over the world and has become a global language nowadays. The opportunities are sharing equally for everyone who is a part of the global community and using English. To be a global citizen, anyone needs to know English. Especially, English-major students who are learning the English language as a tool for their future careers. English communication becomes one of the keys to their success. Besides, students who are good at English skills are beneficial in a competitive work environment after their graduation. Like the other countries in Asia, English speaking is not a strength of high school students in Vietnam, so university students must face many problems to express their thoughts effectively (Hosni, 2014). Therefore, many graduate students cannot meet recruitment requirements as a sequence. English speaking lessons are integrated to help students improve speaking skills in a large amount of time due to all curriculums in Vietnam Higher Education.

This study investigates some kinds of communication breakdowns during English speaking classes at Ho Chi Minh City University of Food Industry. The expectation of this study is to help teachers apply effective ways which motivate students in speaking lessons in real classroom and situations. This study also promotes students' passion and interest in speaking English via their communication in their class time.

2. Literature Review

2.1 What is Communication?

According to Pearson and Nelson (1997), 'communication' is defined as the process of understanding and sharing meaning (p.5). This process requires understanding, perceiving, interpreting, and comprehending the meaning of the verbal and non-verbal behavior of others (Pearson & Nelson, 1997, p. 5). This definition is verified and extended by" Hernández and Garay:

"The communication is a process of social interaction of a verbal or non-verbal nature, with intentionality of transmission and that can influence, with and without intention, in the behavior of the people who are in the coverage of said emission."
(Hernández & Garay, 2005).

2.2. Communication breakdowns

The studies on communication breakdowns (CBs) are early mentioned by Schegloff and his colleagues (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977; Schegloff, 1992). The term communication breakdown is mentioned as a point where the flow of communication is broken due to problem(s) of various nature (involving linguistics and non-linguistic factors).

Ädel and Mauranen (2010) claim that the default assumption for every conversation is understanding, but the understanding is not signalled. Therefore, the continuous progression and expected turns in conversations are considered signals for successful communications. Besides, Nguyen Thac and Hoang Anh (1991) point out that there are four signs of communication such as (i) a phenomenon specific to humans, only humans have real communication, (ii) a way of expressing relationships with one or more other people on the basis of economic and political relations of society; (iii) the exchange of information and mutual understanding, and the mutual understanding between people. They found that a positive communication environment provides opportunities to students to find out the way to communicate, and thus, have better communication skills to be better prepared for the job market after completing their degree. The communication process generally involves four elements: the speaker, the receiver, channel, and feedback (Baird, 1982). According to Kang (2002), speaking a foreign language is not easy for non-native (NN) learners, for oral communication requires different elements in social interactions. Burns and Joyce (1999) stated that speaking combines three factors: producing, receiving, and processing information.

Kementerian (2006) defines that communication skills are components of generic skills that have been identified as a focus at the tertiary level. In Vietnam's higher educational system, communication skills have been tailored and included in soft skills programs for undergraduate students due to some of their necessities (Tang, 2020; Vo, et al., 2020). Many studies have carried out to promote these skills because they contribute a lot for graduate students to get jobs in the future (Ihmeideh, Al-Omari, & Al-Dababneh, 2010). It can be found that a positive communication environment will create opportunities for students to communicate and thus have better communication skills.

2.3. Types of Communication strategies (CSs)

Nguyen Thu Thu and Nguyen Thi Kieu Thu (2016) have proposed 28 communication strategies used by Vietnamese learners in communication with NL speakers (see Table 1). These strategies were integrated from many types of research on the field of CSs : *verbal interaction* (Tarone, 1980; Faerch & Kasper, 1980), and *the cognitive process of selecting CSs* (Bialystok, 1983; Kellerman, 1995; Poulisse, 1997).

Table 1. CSs for reducing communication breakdowns between Non-native and Native language peakers (Thu & Thu, 2016)

1.Avoidance strategies	1.1. Topic avoidance: To avoid talking about a concept
	1.2. Message abandonment: To stop in mid-utterances
2.Compensatory strategies	2.1 Intra-actional strategies
	2.1.1. Word coinage: To make up a non-existing new word to communicate
	2.1.2 Code-switching: To switch the language to L1 without bothering to translate
	2.1.3 Foreignizing: To adjust L1 to L2 phonologically and/ nor morphologically
	2.1.4 Use of non-linguistic means: To replace a word with non-verbal clues
	2.1.5 Self repair: To make a self-correction of one's own speech
	2.1.6 Mumbling: To mumble with inaudible voice
	2.1.7 Use of all-purpose words: To extend a general, empty item to the exact word
	2.1.8 Approximation: To substitute the L2 item with the item which shares the same meaning
	2.1.9 Circumlocution: To describe the properties of the object instead of the exact target item
	2.1.10 Literal translation: To translate word from L1 to L2
2.1.11 Use of filters/ hesitation devices: To use filling words to gain time to think	

2.1.12 Self-repetition: To repeat words or phrases of one's own speech
2.1.13 Other repetition: To repeat something the interlocutor said to gain time
2.1.14 Omission: To leave a gap when not knowing a word or continue as if it was understandable
2.2 Interactional strategies
2.2.1 Asking for repetition: To ask for repetition when having comprehension difficulty
2.2.2 Appeal for help: To request direct or indirect help from the interlocutor
2.2.3 Clarification request: To request for more explanation to solve a comprehension difficulty
2.2.4 Asking for confirmation: To request confirmation that something is understood correctly
2.2.5 Comprehension check: To ask questions to check interlocutor's understanding
2.2.6 Expressing non-understanding: To show one's own inability to understand messages

In this study, we based on the strategies in Table 1 for analyzing the data but also shortened the list to four main types which are *avoiding* (involving topic and Message abandonment), *paraphrasing* (involving Approximation, Circumlocution, Word Coinage), *borrowing* (involving Literal Translation, Language mixing/switching), *appeal for assistance*, and *mime*.

3. Methodology

The material was part of the Ho Chi Minh City University of Food Industry Videos and Voice repository (HUFV-VVR), which were recorded and stored by foreign language teachers, containing transcripts naturally occurring in persons between Vietnamese and English learners native language (NL) teachers. For this study, we selected all instances of conversations that have contained a silences mode for than 3s in their conversations to analyze them by using sound waveform. The reduced corpus comprised 11 conversations containing 18,407 words. The total participants in the conversations were 28 third-year students and four NL teachers. The NL teachers come from different English – speaking countries: America (1), Australia (1), and England (2). Their ages varied from 25 to 60. The data were processed with the help of Sketch Word Engine, a tool to analyze how the language works, at the address: <https://www.sketchengine.eu/>

The collected databases were first explored in search of reasons and types of communication breakdowns between Vietnamese students of English major and NL lecturers. The dataset was analyzed in details to identify what caused the failures and what strategies were used to resolve them. Similar types of causes and strategies were then grouped together to a larger term based on their linguistic characteristics.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Communication breakdowns sources

The data consisted of 11 instances of CBs s and conversations were resolved immediately with the help of Vietnamese teachers or students' gestures or changing the topics of conversations. Table 2 illustrates the summary of the reasons causing CBs in these instances of speech. The reasons might be subjective due to the responses from the NL lecturers who had taken part in these conversations.

Table 2. Major types causing CBs

No	Reasons	Frequencies	Percent	Lecturers in charge
1	<i>Perceptual and Language Differences</i>	6	21.43	FL1, FL2, FL3, FL4
2	<i>Information Overload</i>	5	17.86	FL1, FL2, FL4
3	<i>Inattention</i>	4	14.29	FL2, FL3 FL4
4	<i>Time Pressures</i>	2	7.14	FL1, FL2
5	<i>Distraction/Noise</i>	1	3.57	FL3
6	<i>Emotions</i>	5	17.86	FL1, FL2, FL3 FL4
7	<i>Complexity in Organizational Structure</i>	3	10.71	FL3 FL4
8	<i>Poor retention</i>	2	7.14	FL1, FL4
Total		28	100	

The three most common reasons for CBs are *Perceptual and Language Differences* with 21.43%, *Information Overload* and *Emotions* with the same rate at 17.86%. Although all students received the same messages from NL teachers, they interpret the messages in their own way. Their responses were not accepted in the interview with NL teachers in their speaking examination. For instance, when a student was asked, "How can we identify the value of one person?", and students might wrongly respond, "A person valued as/in....". or when the teacher asked questions that might include much information as a background for students' understanding

and processing. When students had to answer such kinds of these questions, they could not recall and process the data given in the teacher's questions. Sometimes, when the teachers finished their speaking turns, the students were still waiting for something before they gave the answers. Additionally, emotion also contributed to the breakdowns of communications as NL teacher number 1 had commented: "Students are worried too much about the exam, they are easy to fall into silence even when they were asked a very simple question about the weather."

FL1: *What's the best weather for travelling ?*

Student #3: *weather? &^#!()^.*

[4s pausing]

FL1: *According to you, what is the best weather for you to travel?*

Student #3: *I think the best weather for travelling is dried and rainy because it...*

The least common reason is *distraction or noise* with only 3.57% but it is worth discussing. The learning environment at that time was affected by the noise from the airplane in the sky. Students could not focus on all of the words spoken by the foreign examiner in their conversations.

[2-3s loud noise from the airplane land off over the building]

FL4: *How could your hometown be improved?*

[3s pausing]

Student #3: *um & ^ # * ! () ^ . Could you repeat your question?*

FL4: *OK. Could you tell us how your hometown had improved recently?*

When NL teachers were asked to give the details of CBs for each of the conversations: the possible causes are more than in Figure 1 because each conversation has more than reasons during the length of the speech.

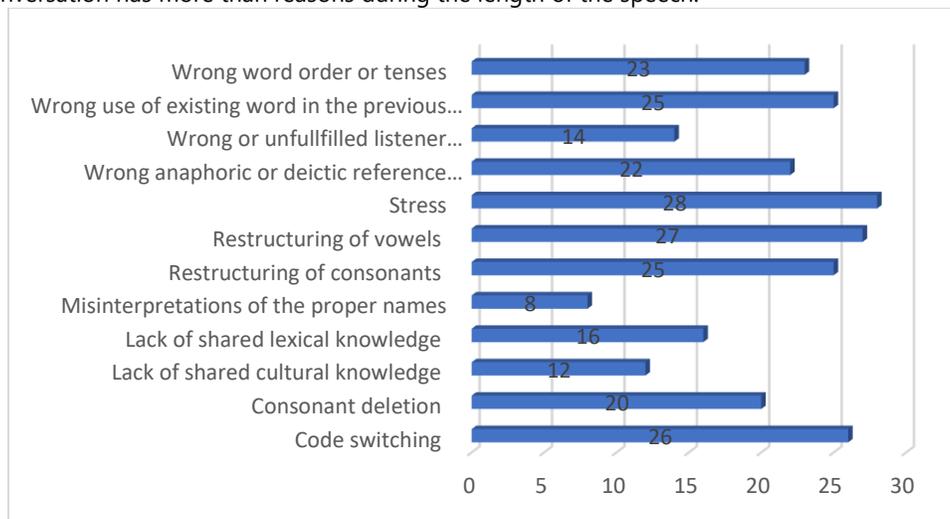


Figure 1. Major causes of CBs

Although there were many causes of CBs as listed in Figure 1., the conversations were resolved by the teacher's turns immediately. Indicators such as *Misinterpretation of the proper names* (8) or *Lack of shared cultural knowledge* (12) meant they had problems with perception or concentration due to the difference in two languages and cultures

Table 3. Mother tongue influence on the language communications

Problems	Frequencies	Percentage
<i>Restructuring of vowels</i>	15	22.06
<i>Restructuring of consonants</i>	14	20.59
<i>Consonant deletion</i>	22	32.35
<i>Stress</i>	17	25.00
Total	68	100.00

Students also have many difficulties associated with English communication with native English speakers due to the communicative competence. They might not know the language rules and the ways to implement the language knowledge in a real situation for communications. Some of the CBs were completely complicated because they are intricately linked with each other among

problems. Table 3 presents Cross-linguistic influence (CLI) on speaking. The collected data via the interview with NL speakers revealed that Vietnamese learners of English have all problems with CLI on their speaking abilities from all kinds of speech aspects as vowels, consonants, and stress with a relative rate of around 25 percent.

4.2. Strategies for reducing CBs between Native and Non-native English speakers

HUFI students used a large number of strategies to overcome the communication breakdowns with NL teachers. Table 4 illustrates the techniques used by themselves in their speaking lessons and examinations.

Table 4. HUFI students' strategies to reduce CBs with NL teachers

Strategies	Frequencies	Percent
1. Avoiding	5	17.86
1.1 <i>Topic Avoiding</i>	(3)	(10.71)*
1.2 <i>Message Abandonment</i>	(2)	(7.15)*
2. Paraphrasing	14	50.00
2.1 <i>Approximation</i>	7	(25.00)*
2.2 <i>Circumlocution</i>	4	(14.29)*
2.3 <i>Word Coinage</i>	3	(10.71)*
3. Borrowing	3	10.71
3.1 <i>Literal Translation</i>	(2)	(7.14)*
3.2 <i>Language mixing/switching</i>	(1)	(3.57)*
4. Appeal for assistance	4	14.28
5. Mime	2	7.15
Total	28	100

* Statistical number is included in the above figures

According to the data from Table 4, the most common strategy employed by HUFI students was Paraphrasing with 50 percent of frequency and the least one was Mime with only 7.15 percent of usage. Many of them used L2 lexemes or structures that they might know incorrectly, but they sought the ones that shared some common semantics features with the words they wish to express, e.g., 'rose' for 'all kinds of the flowers they tended to use'. Twenty-five percent of NNL speakers in the survey have used *Approximation* strategy as their major strategy. Also, 14.29 percent of them employed their self-initiated repair as *Circumlocution* strategy in the following instance of speech to seek vocabularies and structures to develop their communications.

NNL speaker : *What is the biggest challenge you've faced in you study?*

Participant #8 : *Challenge er er , ..., I may ..., oh ...find ...er ..., some difficulties in er , ..., er, some difficulties in my study...*

Nearly 11 percent of instances of speech were found with Coinage words such as 'airball' for 'balloon', baby-horse for 'foal', etc. This strategy had the same rate with Borrowing technique (10.71 %) in the form of mother tongue influence on the target language use. They sometimes use Vietnamese words for their unknown English words. Therefore, NL teachers have to stop the conversations for checking whether they were saying something correct or a misspelling. This finding was harmonized with the previous study of Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982)

As stated by Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), *borrowing* (also called *transfer*) described as the use of past knowledge and past experience in a new situation. For example, one who had already known how to read in one language, she/he had not learned new words that written symbols represented sound when they were learning to read in a second language. This kind of transfer was reflected in the frequent use of the first language and the second language mixed expression. Borrowing strategy indicated that students lacked their vocabulary size requirement as C1-level of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages as described as their graduation learning goals.

The other strategies were Avoiding, Appeal for assistance, and Mime with 17.86%, 14.28%, and 7.50%, respectively. These strategies were used when students did not talk about the concepts they had to talk about or talk about these concepts, but they could not continue smoothly.

5. Conclusion

This study was part of the interests in CBs explored in second language learning environments. This study contributed to a foreign language learning environment such as a Vietnamese context. The study on CBs has significance in improving students' speaking skills to prepare them for the future job markets. The key findings of the study were beneficial for language teachers and learners in their learning and teaching. First, the results have listed all of the CB sources. Language teachers may intervene in their material and teaching process to reduce the CBs for their students. Students, in turn, also know their weaknesses to equip themselves with some of the necessary knowledge to practice speaking skill with the highest performance and efficiency. Second, five common strategies were analyzed to see how students could use them to overcome their CBS. Basing on each strategy, language teachers

can build up their lesson plans to strengthen students with an appropriate approach. This study might open up further research on CBs with communication concerns as a must-have soft skill for Higher Education curriculum design.

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