11 Elaborating Elaboration in Academic Tutorials: Changing cultural assumptions

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Introduction

This paper looks at how cultural assumptions change the rhetorical effects of particular utterances, and, as a result, how a change of awareness is necessary for interlanguage pragmatic development. The rhetorical function looked at is that of elaboration in spoken interaction in academic contexts. The motivation for rhetorical effects is analysed in terms of sociopragmatic (Thomas, 1983; Leech, 1983; Kasper, 1992) assumptions, that is culturally evolved ways of using and interpreting linguistic utterances. Such assumptions are deep-rooted and for the most part unconscious, so that their motivation needs to be probed.

We found that the motivation for elaboration in the British context was essentially critical appraisal, both in terms of what was expected by tutors (elaboration prompts) and in terms of how students elaborated (elaboration strategies); that elaboration on the part of the student in this way was not expected in the Japanese context, but that elaboration did take place, motivated by differing sociopragmatic assumptions.

Elaboration Prompts and Sociopragmatic Assumptions

In the attempt to probe the deeper level assumptions regarding elaboration, we looked at the kinds of utterances intended to elicit it in authentic data from tutorials in Britain. This included 12 video-recorded tutorials, 20 audio-
recorded tutorials, and observation notes from over 60 tutorials in both cross-cultural (British tutor/Japanese student) and native speaker (British tutor and British student) contexts in fine art, music, drama, dance, and communications.

We found frequent occurrences of wh-questions, yes/no questions, comments, tag questions, either/or questions, and hypothetical questions, which we characterised as elaboration prompts. The following example shows how they function:

(1)

**BT (British Tutor):** What kind of music do you like best?

**JS (Japanese Student):** Minimalism.

**BT:** I wonder what it is about minimalism that you like so much?

(audio-taped tutorial)

The initial prompt was breadth-affording, leaving the student scope to tailor an elaboration. When elaboration did not occur, a second prompt of a similar nature, but linguistically more opaque, followed. This suggests that the initial prompt was intended as a request for a more wide-ranging analysis. When it was not forthcoming, the use of an ultra-polite formula possibly covered up a sense of exasperation at the lack of an appropriate response to what seemed an obvious request. This combination of negative politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and linguistic opacity seems to be the result of taken-for-granted assumptions. Ultimately, it is not conducive to effective cross-cultural communication.

The next examples show a contrasting take-up of the comment as an elaboration-cuing prompt:

(2)

**BT:** Em .. This has all the feeling .. of em, er, techniques of Nihonga.

**JS:** Ah. [After a pause, the tutor went on to elaborate.]

(video-taped tutorial)

(3)

**BT:** You seem not to be using the circular device any more.

**BS:** Yeah, that kinda stems from when I was trying to work with the image of the pebble dropping in the water, and the kind of rhythm that ensued .. . , but that wasn't getting me anywhere, I'm not really sure where I'm going .. .

(video-taped tutorial)

While the Japanese student does not take the tutor's observation further, the British student is obviously aware of the demands of the genre (the fine art tutorial) that he is participating in. In, no doubt unconsciously, picking up the need to explain what is happening in his work, he shows his awareness of the sociopragmatic assumptions shaping the communicative rationale of the tutorial.

The tag question works similarly, being a more implicit comment on the part of the tutor. This example from a tutorial on dance, 'stillness is not the same as doing nothing, is it?' demands that the student agree as well as show that she understands the difference between stillness and doing nothing in dance-analytical terms, by elaborating that explanation. In other words, the more explicit request, 'can you tell me the difference between stillness and doing nothing?' is sociopragmatically assumed, but not uttered.

All of these elaboration prompts show a conflict between the pragmalinguistic function of the speech acts deployed, which appear to be straightforward requests or comments, and the deeper underlying sociopragmatic purpose of getting students to evaluate, and to develop ideas. It seems that the linguistic action of elaboration in academic contexts in Britain relates to the deeply embedded cultural demand for critical appraisal. The valorisation of critical thinking has been documented in research (Entwistle, 1984) into lecturers' perceptions of what study of their various disciplines promoted. A closer study of the linguistic strategies of elaboration may therefore enhance the understanding of what critical thinking entails. This is supported by the case of a PhD candidate (Street, 1994) who did not seem to have the same understanding as her examiners of what was meant by the encouragement to 'elaborate' or 'ease out' the argument. She felt she was being asked to reiterate things she had already said.

While it seems that the extent to which the request for elaboration is hidden linguistically reveals the extent to which it is taken for granted, two prompt strategies in particular constrain the making of judgments and choices crucial to critical appraisal. One is the either/or question, which obviously limits the field of choices to two, and the other is the hypothetical question, which takes the student out of the present situation and enforces a judgment. The either/or question, 'are you more interested in working two-dimensionally or three-dimensionally?' asked of a fine art student entails an analytical choice which will determine the future development of the student's work. The following extract shows the progression of a tutor's strategies, from an apparently simple information-eliciting wh-question, to a rather dramatic hypothetical scenario, as he successively fails to get the student to make the required appraisal.
translated into Japanese and used in interviews conducted by Japanese tutors with their undergraduate linguistics students. Wh-questions such as 'what do you think of your essay?' or 'how are you going to prove your claim in the latter part of your paper?' were most frequent, followed by imperatives ('please explain what you want to discuss in this paper') and yes/no questions ('could you elaborate section 1 a little bit more?'). They are all used directly as information elicitors rather than as implicit prompts for critical appraisal. The comment strategy ('I think you should do it this way rather than that way, but...'), negative yes/no questions ('don't you think it is a good idea to...?'), and tag questions ('comparison with the German data will make your essay more convincing, won't it?') function as strong recommendations, propelling the student in a particular direction, rather than eliciting from him/her how they have oriented themselves in the field. Either/or and hypothetical questions also do not appear to demand analysis on the part of the student. In the former, the tutor has usually formulated a contrasting analysis and the student needs only make a choice. The following example is illustrative of how a tutor is likely to formulate an either/or question, and shows how the burden of analysis is differently placed in the two cultures. 'This part of your work is more 3-dimensional and this is more 2-dimensional, which area are you more interested in?'

Hypothetical questions tend to be interpreted as advice, as in 'what do you think would happen if you used a role play as data elicitation? answered by 'I think I should do that.' These differences appear to result from differing sociopragmatic assumptions, which were further revealed in the kinds of elaboration strategies used in a discourse completion test.

Elaboration Strategies

The aim of the discourse completion test (DCT) was to find out by larger-scale elicitation how students actually elaborated in five tutorial situations cued by different prompt types. As the aim was to detail the kinds of elaboration strategies used rather than analyse at a micro-level the varying aspects of spoken language use, we felt that the instructions to fill in as if speaking would give us adequate data, and at the same time would ease the administrative procedure. The test was administered to both British (36) and Japanese (169) informants. 88 of the Japanese informants answered in English while 81 responded to a translated version in Japanese. The Japanese informants who answered in English were further broken down into those who had at least one year's experience of study in an English speaking country (24) and those who hadn't (64). The DCT was answered by students and tutors of literature, linguistics, geology, and a number of other science and social science areas. The level of English of the students varied from intermediate to advanced.
The elaboration strategies that we arrived at (Table 11.1) were the result of a three-stage process. The present authors initially coded the English language data individually. Upon agreement of the strategies at the fourth reformulation, the Japanese language data was looked at in the light of the coding system by two Japanese researchers and two research assistants independently. The final scoring of this data was agreed by discussion. We divided the resulting elaboration strategies into two broad groups, analytical, and non-analytical elaboration. The following example of elaboration elicited from a British fine art lecturer after the coding procedure on the DCTs seemed both to validate and to epitomise the analytical strategies we had defined – developmental, comparative, evaluative and delimiting:

(5)

Tutor: Have you visited any art galleries recently?

Student: Yes, I went to see the X exhibition at the Y gallery. I'd seen a previous exhibition of her work about three years ago [COMPARATIVE] and I wanted to see how it had changed [DEVELOPMENTAL]. It seems to have become more architectural [EVALUATIVE and COMPARATIVE]. The objects are much larger in scale, less like furniture and more to do with architectural space [COMPARATIVE], relating to the whole body being able to walk round, under, or through them [DELIMITING]. It's quite an unexpected turn for her work to take [EVALUATIVE], much less predictable than it used to be, much richer than the previous formula [COMPARATIVE].

Such a fully elaborated example rarely occurred in the DCTs (Hiraga & Turner, 1994), but it encapsulates the analytical strategies used, which occurred despite differences in the disciplinary content. The contrasting constructed example below illustrates the non-analytical elaboration strategies used, which we labelled technical, personal, informative and conciliatory:

(6)

Student: Yes, I went to see the X exhibition at the Y gallery. It was very impressive [PERSONAL]. The gallery also featured the Z as a special display of the month [INFORMATIVE]. As I didn't have enough time [PERSONAL] to go to both, I just saw the X, because it was what Prof. A recommended in class [CONCILIATORY]. I would certainly like to go back there [PERSONAL] in one of the mornings next week when the gallery is relatively empty [TECHNICAL].

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Types</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>Developmental</td>
<td>to develop ideas</td>
<td>'I'm interested in gender difference in language use. They say women's speech and use of language are different from those of men. I want to study why such difference exists.' (2/J)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative</td>
<td>to compare two ideas, authors, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td>'I don't see how it fits with the overall argument in the book.' (1/B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative</td>
<td>to evaluate ideas</td>
<td></td>
<td>'I felt that [his] theories were relevant to what we've been looking at recently in the course.' (2/B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimiting</td>
<td>to show an awareness of scope, to narrow the focus</td>
<td></td>
<td>'... at least I've read one or two of her recent papers on... ' (2/J)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Analytical</td>
<td>to refer to technical (non-substantial) points</td>
<td></td>
<td>'It was really hard how to incorporate it with the presentation, because I was allowed to have just a few minutes to present.' (3/J)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>to display personal opinion or feelings</td>
<td></td>
<td>'I like the work of him very much. I wanted to incorporate it into my essay for a long time, and the chance has come finally. I'm really glad to do it, and happy that you like it' (3/J)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative</td>
<td>to give information</td>
<td></td>
<td>'I am interested in his study. And I have thought why the difference between each class ours. He has the conclusion that it is because especially people in the upper class have prestige and they do not want to pronounce in the same way as people in the lower class.' (2/3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conciliatory</td>
<td>to relate or reconcile the interests of two different parties</td>
<td></td>
<td>'But even then you suggest so, I will try to make it shorter.' (5/J)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary of Discourse Completion Test Results

Four major findings emerged. Firstly, in terms of analytical elaboration, the different types of prompts made very little difference to the kinds of strategies deployed by the British informants. All the situations in the DCT elicited analytical strategies. By contrast, non-analytical strategies were used regardless of the type of prompt by the Japanese groups, while they occurred less frequently in the British data. It is assumed therefore that the elaboration strategies used do not depend on the grammatical form of the prompt, but more on the sociopragmatic assumptions underlying the prompts in each culture.

Secondly, when we compared the variation of strategies according to the informant groups, the British informants employed analytical strategies of a comparative and evaluative nature more often than the other groups. The Japanese informants did not entirely avoid analytical strategies, but it is notable that the comparative strategy was extremely rare in the Japanese-language and the English-language Japanese respondents with no study abroad, whereas it occurred in four out of five situations in the British data. This preference for the comparative strategy along with the analytical use of the either/or prompt in the British context seems indicative of a predilection for dialectical thinking.

What is interesting in terms of interlanguage pragmatics is that the English-language Japanese respondents with more than one year’s study abroad, showed an overall similar disposition of analytical and non-analytical strategies to the British data. This would seem to suggest that direct exposure to the western academic system had influenced their elaboration strategies. Conversely, there appears to be a transfer from Japanese sociopragmatic assumptions in the other English-language respondents, as their variation profile in analytical and non-analytical strategies indicated considerable resemblance with the Japanese-language data.

Thirdly, the most salient non-analytical strategies in all the data groups were technical and personal strategies. The personal strategy occurred in almost all the situations in the Japanese data and the English-language but no experience abroad data, but in only two situations in the British and the English-language experience abroad data. It seems that in Japan, elaborating on personal grounds is more widely acceptable, while in Britain it is more restricted to contexts such as compliments, which demand it.

Fourthly, the use of the informative and the conciliatory strategies seemed to be particularly Japanese. The informative strategy was used by the Japanese groups in four out of five situations. This appears to be operating against the background sociopragmatic assumption that what is required is the display of knowledge. The conciliatory strategy has two rhetorical effects, namely keeping the peace and complying with what the tutor seems to want. In a situation where the prompt demanded a choice out of two interpretations of the student’s essay, the Japanese informants tended to avoid choosing, saying for example, ‘when I wrote this sentence, I didn’t mean that I completely agreed with the author, but it doesn’t mean I was criticising him’, or ‘I cannot agree nor criticise. I wrote just what I felt’, declining to see things in an antithetical way. This seems to show a preference for a holistic way of thinking which interrelates with the lack of comparison as an analytical strategy.

In response to the question ‘what would you say if I suggested you made the concluding section a bit shorter?’ some students answered as if they were following the suggestion because it came from the tutor rather than giving it their consideration. For example, ‘thank you for giving me your invaluable opinions. Because my conclusion is quite simple, I will express it in a shorter manner as you suggest’. The use of the conciliatory strategy here shows sensitivity to the authoritative role of the tutor.

Elaboration Strategies and Sociopragmatic Structuring

The difference in occurrence of analytical and non-analytical strategies operating in the DCT data seems to indicate that each culture emphasises different aspects of the academic process. While British academic culture is predominantly thinking-centred, valuing the process of critical appraisal by means of such analytical strategies as comparison, evaluation, and probing further, Japanese academic culture is predominantly knowledge-centred, valuing the demonstration of knowledge gained by following the correct procedures in adequate detail and technique. This is seen in the desire to be informative, and the greater use, over all the situations, of the technical strategy. Furthermore, the valorisation of dialectical thinking on the one hand and holistic reasoning on the other seem to be diametrically opposed.

To sum up, changing from one academic context to another makes for an interchange of differing, sometimes conflicting assumptions. In such an encounter, it is necessary for the participants to develop an awareness of their own cultural assumptions as well as those of the other culture. We hope that in elaborating the differing sociopragmatic assumptions underlying elaboration in academic contexts in Britain and Japan, we have contributed to such a development.
Section 3: Change, Language Education and the Developing World

Introduction

This sub-theme of the Conference explored the complex relationships between language education and social change in developing countries. Issues raised included the choice of national languages, the role of English as the medium of contact in development activities, and the role of agencies such as the British Council in language education in the developing world. The focus of attention in this sub-theme, therefore, was on the way in which language education and language policy influence, support or hinder the planned or deliberate social change which constitutes the essence of development activity.

The starting point for this discussion is D. P. Pattanayak’s rousing discussion of ‘Change, Language and the Developing World’. Pattanayak argues that in order to understand the language situation in many developing countries it is necessary to appreciate that multilingualism and multiculturalism are an absolutely fundamental phenomenon. If we can adopt this perspective – and Pattanayak suggests that many Western commentators may have difficulty in doing so – then it becomes apparent that monolingualism is an exceptional state of affairs. A multilingual society, for Pattanayak, is a rich and diverse society. One implication of this argument is that, in planning change, we must strive to ensure that variety is maintained; any diminution in the multilingual and multicultural character of society leads to an impoverishment of that society as a whole and the cultural dispossession of individual members of it. This argument leads Pattanayak to fear the growing international hegemony of English.

The contribution by Martin Cortazzi and Lixian Jin, ‘Changes in Learning English Vocabulary in China’, provides an interesting contrast with Pattanayak’s chapter. Cortazzi and Jin demonstrate that over recent years there has been a massive increase in the numbers of people in China who are learning and teaching English. They do not share Pattanayak’s concern
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