Communicative breakdown and repair in interviews: a Thai case study

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Abstract

This study investigates the rarely researched area of communicative breakdown in interviews between a native speaker of English and mainly Thai students. Taking a methodological approach derived partially from research in spoken discourse analysis, the coded interview data revealed fundamentally that most breakdown was caused by the use of linguistically challenging lexis and of concepts of which students may have lacked awareness. In general, though, it became clear that such a surface-level interactional analysis based on a quantitative codification of the data on its own did not suffice in explaining everything about the breakdown sequences. To enable a more complete picture to be drawn for this purpose, a qualitative supplement to the data analysis was added covering elements of Thai culture and context in the interview setting. This triangulation of quantitative and qualitative analyses showed the complementary nature of surface-level coding of interaction and selected socio-cultural criteria in small-scale research.

Introduction

This report into communicative breakdown between a native speaker of English and south-east Asian students firstly provides the background context to the study. As turn-taking and interviewing in the

Thai context are core features of the research, a review of the literature in these fields is provided. This review is essential in explaining the theoretical basis for the subsequent attempt to create a coding system for the interview data itself. This is followed by initially a quantitative data analysis of the coded interaction. To complement this analysis, I also investigate the contextual and cultural factors possibly affecting the breakdowns and the interview in general. Finally, conclusions are drawn in an attempt to seek reasons for the breakdown in this particular data.

Background context

The purpose of this small-scale study was to analyse 23 communicative breakdown sequences which occurred whilst interviewing 20 mostly Thai and other south-east Asian students at a vocational college in Thailand in June 1999. The results of this analysis were then to be used to reflect upon interview technique in subsequent interviewing sessions. These interviews, in English, focused on their English language learning strategies upon entry to the pre-sessional program.

The student-interviewees voluntarily participated in the interviews. They were aged between 17 and 21 years old, 17 of whom came from Thailand, 1 from Vietnam, 1 from South Korea and 1 from Germany. All except for the students from Germany and Vietnam had completed secondary school education in Thailand. Of the 13 students involved in the 23 communicative breakdowns recorded, 12 were Thai and 1 from Vietnam. All interviews were devised and conducted by myself, the Head of Academic Studies, in my office at the college. The interviews were semi-structured, based around five core areas about learning strategies

and were broken down into ten subsequent questions. Each question was initiated by a pre-determined structured question and was supported by various examples of the intended meaning - called here "clues" - to aid comprehension. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the support of notes taken which included paralinguistic observations.

Literature Review

In reviewing the literature related to this small-scale research, a number of issues are addressed which all, arguably to various degrees, influence the methodology chosen and the interpretation of the results. These are: turn-taking, ethnography, pragmatics, interviewing and communicative breakdown with particular emphasis on repair in spoken discourse.

Firstly, from the literature on turn-taking, the issue of the interpretation of the exchange or sequence in spoken discourse is to be examined. Edmondson (1981 in Taylor and Cameron 1987: 61) views this discourse in terms of the "inter-dependent" perspectives of turns, as researched by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975, 1992), and the "illocutionary force" within those turns. However, this stance fundamentally avoids consideration of contextual cues in the illocutionary perspective, keeping instead to a surface-level investigation of interaction. Tsui's (1994 and 1995) turn-taking research too follows a surface-level investigation but she readily admits to the importance of a deeper-level perspective of the participants' cultural background which is "intertwined" with turn-taking behaviour (Tsui, 1994: 78).

Immediately, this opens the discussion as to what role context and cultural background information play in the interpretation of utterances,

especially in the cross-cultural context. Gumperz (1982: 166) clearly states that:

"A speech activity is a set of social relationships enacted about a set of schemata in relation to one communicative goal."

However, there is a need for teacher-researchers to perhaps combine these two fields of analysis into one which can suit their particular needs. Such combinations are potentially rewarding in that insights into context, participant background and the patterns or idiosyncrasies of discourse can be seen as being interrelated. How such assessment is structured asks the question as to which criteria is to be investigated first. If the talk itself is analysed firstly from a functional perspective, there is the danger of creating categories (denotations of coding) which are "induced from the data" (Taylor and Cameron 1987: 53), fitting the researcher's own data yet lacking universal applicability. In addition to this argument, Kreckel's research (ibid.: 53) criticises Edmondson's (1977) and Labov and Fanshell's (1981) taxonomies on the grounds that their proposed universal taxonomies fail in that not all speakers "share typologies of illocutionary acts" and do not consider the "deep" analysis of "what is really going on." It could be argued at this point that taxonomies for the analysis of talk requiring coding derived from the surface features of discourse in the *IRF* (Initiation — Response-Feedback) model, or variants thereof, can be used in a quasi-quantitative manner in triangulation with the more qualitative contextual information as support. This calls for the combination of the coding of talk with contextual and background cultural information as a means to explain what occurs in that talk under analysis.

In terms of how this context and background cultural information

can perform such a role, care need s to be taken as to whether the findings are to be generalised or are specific to that interaction. In this sense, small-scale investigations may have the objective of finding out "what is going on" at both surface and deeper levels in terms of only those particular discourse participants under investigation without striving to create universal applicability for its chosen taxonomy. Although such "microethnography" gives an analysis at the interactional level, it need not be invalidated if "contextual or ecological" information is provided (Saville-Troike 1996: 357).

Turning to what constitutes a repair or maintenance in spoken discourse, Stubbs (1981 in Taylor and Cameron 1987: 77) argues that native speakers exhibit so-called "intuitions about discourse well-formedness". Presumably, this intuition extends also to a judgement during the course of discourse about what constitutes "ill-formedness" (ibid.), in practice the decision-making juncture where repair is undertaken. Yet if "blatant and repeated violation" (ibid: 79) occurs so frequently in spoken discourse, then to term breakdown-free exchange as "ill-formed" is perhaps in itself misleading. This would then suggest that breakdown and discourse maintenance are naturally core elements in discourse, in which case the adoption of the "well-formed" *IRF* classroom model is inappropriate to super-impose upon other exchange settings (whether casual or more formal than the classroom) as it implies an ideal pattern of turn-taking.

Further to this, Taylor and Cameron (ibid.: 78) point out that there are "conflicting intuitions" about "well-formedness" among participants who themselves may have "different 'grammars' of tacitly-known rules". This would suggest that the NNS (Non-Native Speaker)

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also possesses intuitions and may also retain some rights to make similar judgements as the NS (Native Speaker) to stop the turn taking in order to at least request clarification, and in its extreme interpretation to "challenge" (Coulthard 1985: 77) the NS's move. Furthermore, intuition itself surely needs to be seen as an integral factor in breakdown, as it appears to determine how we maintain discourse. This leads to the conclusion that "rules of discourse" (op.cit: 79), if at all definable, "draw on extra-linguistic knowledge" (ibid.) emanating from culturally-shaped intuition as well as linguistic presumptions. Schegloff (2000: 233) succinctly comments that the NS/NNS interaction provides a setting in which NNS "bring a special set of characteristics, capabilities, vulnerabilities, and practices of speaking, hearing, and understanding to a socio-interactional site already shaped by a range of structures of practice...".

In response to this recognition of "a special set" (ibid.) of idiosyncrasies for either NS or NNS participant, the rationale for exercising such intuition needs to be examined. "Structural oddity", mishearing, misunderstanding or not concurring with the previous speaker's statement are listed by Taylor and Cameron (ibid.: 77), yet I would put forward the case to create some broad categories which also denote the response in terms of linguistic and then conceptual misunderstanding. Linguistic miscomprehension could be broken down into structural and illocutionary categories, thereby concurring partly with the first two categories of "communicative breakdown" causes as outlined by Thomas (1983: 100) of "grammatical error" and "pragmatic error" - caused by "mistaken" or "different beliefs" concerning the illocutionary force of the preceding utterances and rights to express

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them. Thomas's third category addresses "social error", the lack of knowledge, presumably schemata, of the issue under discussion. Conceptual misunderstandings would align themselves more to this latter category. To advocate a taxonomy as detailed as that of Thomas (ibid.) would require analysis of the breakdown's discourse perhaps beyond the ability of those interpreting the utterances as it may be impossible to decide what clearly constitutes grammatical, pragmatic or social error (or indeed linguistic or conceptual misunderstanding) without questioning the speakers about the breakdown itself. This distraction may aid the "repair mechanism" (Sacks *et al* 1974: 724) in theory but may subsequently call for greater re-"focusing" (Coulthard 1992: 22) onto the original topic.

In terms of "repair mechanism" (Sacks *et al* ibid.), the standard "third person repair" (Schegloff 1979 in Tsui 1994: 38-39) as requested by a respondent and self-repair within the turn (Sacks *et al* ibid.) only provide a limited set of repair alternatives possible in interaction, whether NS to NS or NS to NNS. I would argue that the "dual" (ibid.) possibilities existing in repair exchanges are in fact much more varied in that firstly, self-repair can exist within the initiating speaker's turn as well as the respondent. Requests for repair due to linguistic or conceptual difficulties could also be made by either participant (by the respondent in the responding turn or the initiating speaker following a response). This variability in repair possibilities would imply that, despite the claims of an existence of a "pre-allocation of turns" (ibid.) in the particular type of interaction under investigation in this study, interviews, there may be perhaps less of a "pre-determined" (van Lier 1988: 105) nature to those turns within repair mechanisms. If so, the

"dynamic process of recipient design" (Eggins and Slade 1997: 29) could be said to be complemented by a multi-functional expression of intuition in the "sequential context" (Atkinson and Heritage 1984 in Eggins and Slade 1997: 29) of repair; this intuition or willingness to make sense of utterances (both in self-repair and requests for repair) must be seen from a NS - NNS perspective which extends beyond surface analysis.

Viewing the exchange involving repair from a deeper level perspectives draws us at some point to assess the applicability of Grice's maxims, or "Co-operative Principle" (CP) (1975). An assumption of a "common purpose" (ibid.) between participants to follow CP because it conforms to vague "principles of human rationality" or "the rationalist's motivation" (Taylor and Cameron 1987: 85) would be potentially invalid due to the lack of parity between NS and NNS participants (Fairclough 1995: 46) and the doubtful applicability of maxims in experimental settings (including presumably interviews) (Milroy 1984: 27). Furthermore, the concept of rationality in Gricean maxims is also fundamentally not easily one which could be said to be shared across cultures. Surely rationality represents part of the individual's "schema" (Tannen and Wallat 1993: 73) - the knowledge of the world - which would influence the "sociopragmatic" knowledge (Thomas loc.cit) needed to avoid communicative breakdown. Attempts to "deduce some unstated proposition" (Taylor and Cameron op. cit: 85) could, though, be viewed pragmatically as supporting the Gricean standpoint, implying that the NS and NNS manage somehow to "negotiate" (Brown and Yule 1983: 89) their way through the topic despite culturally differing abilities to understand the "implicature" (Taylor and Cameron loc. cit.).

The type of spoken discourse - the interview - must also now be considered. In the analogy of a "linear array" put forward by Sacks *et al* (op.cit.: 729), interviewing may be seen to involve more formal turn-taking than casual conversation. Moves to create a less formalised "series of friendly conversations" (Spradley 1979: 58) may, in theory, enable the respondent to provide more input in a relaxed manner. This would seem to be shifting interviewing along the "array" (ibid.) towards the turn-taking associated with casual conversation, yet the status of the participants, particularly in the Thai setting where interviewers (in this case teacher-researchers) are afforded great respect, could give rise to "hangover from the classroom" (McCarthy 1991: 24). Furthermore, attempts to de-formalise interviewing in the Thai setting may be regarded by the student-respondents as being contrary to their adherence to "krengjai" (Holmes and Tangtongtavy 1995: 90) - a reluctance to challenge authority figures face to face. Moves to create the casual "rapport" often seen in less structured interviewing (Spradley loc.cit.), along with unfamiliarity with interviews conducted in English, may confuse Thai participants who may actually expect a lack of parity in a one-to-one meeting with an older teacher-researcher. The "asymmetrical" (Drew 1991 and Spradley op.cit.: 67) nature of interviews conducted in English which Spradley claims results in "distorted" opinions to be drawn by the interviewer is perhaps the "communicative norm" (Briggs 1986: 2) to which Thai participants would prefer to adhere. Consequently, attempts to de-formalise interviewing may for Thais create the wrong conditions for the provision of respondent input.

Regarding the actual repair undertaken by either participant, it is

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widely accepted that breakdowns in questioning and responses in terms of repetition, rephrasing and encouragement to expand form a natural part of tun-taking (Spradley 1979, Milroy 1984, Labov and Fanshel 1977). Labov and Fanshel (ibid.: 60) actually term the interviewer's repair - "redirecting" - as part of "metalinguistic behaviour" which perhaps in a similar fashion to Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) appears to recognise repair in communicative breakdown as a separate area of study. Milroy (ibid.: 15) actually distinguishes firstly between breakdown and "misunderstandings" - the "simple disparity between the speaker's and the hearer's semantic analysis of a given utterance", and also recognises that communicative breakdown occurs when either participant adjudges the interaction to have "gone wrong" in some linguistic or other capacity. Clearly this latter point implies a shift in emphasis away from interpretation under the interactional jurisdiction of the interviewer.

Perhaps most necessary in recognising both participants' roles to request and carry out repair is some kind of qualitative framework to assess the context in which surface-level turns are taken. Literature of this nature is scarce, yet some attempts, notably by van Dijk (1977) and Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) exist. Van Dijk (ibid.) concentrates on criteria underpinning pragmatic theory, those being "positions" (roles and status), "properties" (gender, age), "relations" (dominance, authority) and "functions" (father, waitress, judge). These categories may form a basis for the qualitative supplement to the surface-level interactional analysis of turn-taking, but need perhaps to be adapted by other criteria. Among these criteria, elements of Thai sociolinguistic behaviour, Gumperz's "contextualisation cues" (1982 in Schiffrin 1996:

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313) representing "aspects of language and behaviour (verbal and nonverbal signs) that relate what is said to contextual presuppositions", and awareness of the "tactics" and "strategies" of "Foreigner Talk Discourse" as outlined by Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991: 126) could be added. Such notes on either individual sequences of communicative breakdown , whole interviews or groups of students may broadly be categorised under ethnographic "sociolinguistic transfer" (Chick 1996: 332), referring to "the use of rules of speaking of one's own speech community or cultural group when interacting with members of another community or group".

The notes on Thai behaviour need to be made in light of their heightened "contextual awareness" (Fieg 1989: 83), their sensitivity to the micro-features of relationships and their disinclination to thinking in "abstract" terms. As Buripakdi and Mahakhan (1980: 259) advise that evaluation of Thai education should be made "in relation to the larger system". Drawing on this analogy, I would advocate an analysis of turn-taking with Thais made in relation to a wider (larger) individual and social context (system).

Coding

Analysis of the 23 cases of communicative breakdown (see Appendices) requires some kind of coding system over the four turns taken. The four-part exchange, or sequence, can be seen in terms of the students involved, the question number, and an amalgamated coding taxonomy. This system covers the interviewer's initiating turns, the interviewees' responses indicating miscomprehension, the interviewer's repair "tactics" (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991: 124), and the final

interviewees' responses indicating comprehension or continued non-comprehension. All turns examined could feasibly include more than one move, creating a combination of codes for each turn taken.

For the interviewer's initiating turns, I have chosen a selection of codings from Tsui's (1994) turn-taking taxonomy which breaks down initiations into various linguistic and illocutionary categories. An IEi in my coding denotes an "Initiation: Elicit: inform" (ibid.: 145) move which seeks to elicit information from the respondent. An IEc represents an "Initiation: Elicit: confirm" (ibid.: 82), a move intended to "confirm the speaker's assumption" (ibid.). One initiation (question 9 with the student Kik) requires a combined coding of IIac, "Initiation: Informative: assessment: compliment" (ibid.: 145) which initially assesses the preceding move (not shown) with the interviewer's compliment of "That's good advice." It is followed in the same turn by "It's always good when students have self-responsibility" which I have coded as IIaa, an "Initiation: Informative: assessment: assessing" (ibid.) which evaluates the previous move in a manner which "upgrades" (ibid.) it.

The interviewees' responding turns are viewed then in terms of the type of miscomprehension shown by the interviewees. In these cases, I have created my own codings, L for linguistic, and C for conceptual miscomprehension, as put forward in the literature review. These are codes which focus upon what I wish to deduce from the data in an illocutionary sense, that being an analysis of the effectiveness of my initiations to linguistically convey the learning strategies themes accurately. I am seeking at this juncture to make an evaluation of the responding moves in terms which I believe influenced how I repaired the

breakdown in the third turn. However, even in retrospect, coding of this nature is problematic, especially in the case of a non-verbal response (see Appendix question 4 with Chinh).

The second turn in combination with the third turn to attempt to repair the miscomprehension may be termed as an "insertion sequence" (Schegloff 1972: 107) in the whole exchange. It represents an adjacency in turns which deviates in theory from the normal interviewing turn-taking in operation. The first denotation in the third turn, R (termed as rephrased re-initiation in my codings), is used to represent a move which repeats, or rephrases, the original initiation in different words. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975: 53 and 1992: 29) term this as a "rephrased question" which is "bound" to the initiating move; Burton (1981: 73) refers to the same move as a "re-opening move" to "re-instate the topic." I have categorised cases where examples, or prompts, of the meaning of the initiations are given - for example, "do you read every word of a text ?" - as Cl, clues. Sinclair and Coulthard (ibid.) regard both my denotations of R and Cl as re-phrased initiations; my perspective, though, simply separates this re-focusing into two categories. The third term of A represents acknowledgements, taken from Tsui's (ibid.: 205) "follow-up: acknowledging" categorisation, admittedly out of turn sequence if the third turn is regarded as the second part of an "inserted sequence" (Schegloff, loc.cit.) rather than the third turn of feed-back as in an I - R - F exchange without communicative breakdown. Nevertheless, linguistically and in an illocutionary sense, the denotation of "yes", "that's right" serves the purpose of "a minimal acknowledgement that the response has been... felicitous" (Tsui, loc.cit.).

Finally, although the fourth turn - the interviewees' responses - could be categorised according to Tsui's (1994) taxonomy or those of others adopting an I- R -F coding, I have again chosen a simpler denotation, in this case, that of ✓ for comprehension and ✕ for miscomprehension. This allows me to focus upon the preceding three turns and evaluate their effectiveness in light of that final comprehension. Table 1 illustrates the chosen codes.

Table 1: Key

Code	Meaning
IEi	Initiation: Elicit: informative
IEc	Initiation: Elicit: confirmInitiation:
IIaa	Initiation: Informative: assessment: assessing
IIac	Initiation: Informative: assessment: compliment
L	Linguistic miscomprehension
C	Conceptual miscomprehension
R	Rephrased Re-initiation
A	Acknowledgement
Cl	Clue
✓	Comprehension
✕	Miscomprehension

Data Analysis

The data is analysed from initially the quantitatively perspective of the four turns in the exchange. The relation between the interview question is also to be considered in this respect. Following this, the qualitative issues of context are to be added, giving overall a surface-level interactional analysis with deeper, qualitative information on the interview and its participants. The first step has been to compile a

summary of the turn-taking activity in coded form below:

Table 2 : Summary of data in coded analysis

Question	Interviewr's initiation	Interviewee's response	Interviewer repair	Interviewee response
2	IEi	L	R	✓
2	IEi	L	R	✓
2	IEi	L	A	✓
2	IEi	L	R	✓
2	IEi	L	R	✓
4	IEi	C	A + Cl	✓
4	IEi	L	A + Cl	✓
4	IEi	C	Cl	✓
4	IEi	C	Cl	✓
4	IEi	C	Cl	✓
4	IEc	L	R	✓
4	IEi	C or L	R	✓
4	IEi	L	A	✓
4	IEi	C or L	Cl	✓
4	IEi	C	Cl	✓
4	IEi	L	R	✓
5	IEc	L	A	✓
8	IEc	L	R	✓
9	llac+llaa	L	R	✓
10	IEi	L	Cl	✓
10	IEi	L	Cl	✓
10	IEi	L	Cl	✓
10	IEi	C or L	R + Cl	✓

Counts of the types of moves taken within the four turns reveal the following:

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Tables 3: Counts of move types across the first three turns

First turn: Interviewer's 23 initiating moves

Initiation: Elicit: informative	19
Initiation: Elicit: confirm	3
Initiation: Informative: assessment: compliment+ Informative: assessment: assessing	1

Second turn: Interviewee's 23 responding moves

Linguistic	15
Conceptual	5
C or L	3

Third turn: Interviewer's 23 repair moves

Rephrased re-initiation	Acknowledge ment	Clue	A + Cl	R + Cl
9	3	8	2	1

Interviewer's initiations and Interviewee's responding turns

Analysing the first two turns of the sequence, of the 19 initiations in the Elicit: informative category (IEi), 11 evoked a linguistic miscomprehension (L), 5 conceptual miscomprehensions (C), and 3 could not be determined as being linguistic or conceptual.

Of the 3 initiations in the elicit: confirm (IEc) category, all 3 received linguistic miscomprehensions. The 1 initiation combining an Initiation: Informative: assessment: compliment (IIac) an Initiation: Informative: assessment: assessing (IIaa) received an unclear linguistic or conceptual response.

Interviewee's responding turns and Interviewer's repairs (Insertion Sequence)

Analysis of the second and third turns, the "insertion sequence" (Schegloff 1972: 107), revealed the following:

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Of the 15 linguistic miscomprehensions, 8 repairs were rephrased re-initiations (R), 3 acknowledgements (A), 4 clues (Cl), and 1 an acknowledgement (A) followed by a clue (Cl).

Of the 5 conceptual miscomprehensions, 4 were clues (Cl) and 1 an acknowledgement (A) followed by a clue (CL).

Of the 3 undeterminable linguistic or conceptual miscomprehensions, 1 was a rephrased re-initiation, 1 a clue and the other a combination of a rephrased re-initiation and a clue.

Interviewer's repair and interviewer's initiations

Analysing the third and first turns, the interviewer's input to the sequence, reveals the following:

Of the 9 rephrased re-initiations, 6 originated in Initiations in the Elicit: informative (IEi) category, 2 in Initiations in the Elicit: confirm category, and 1 a combination of Initiations in the Informative: assessment: compliment (IIac) and Informative: assessment: assessing (IIaa) categories.

Of the 8 clues given, all originated in Initiations in the Elicit: informative category. Of the 3 acknowledgements, 2 originated in Initiations in the Elicit: informative and the other in the Elicit: confirm category. The 2 acknowledgements followed by clues both originated in Initiations in the Elicit: informative category. Finally, the 1 rephrased re-initiation followed by a clue originated in an Initiation in the Elicit: informative category.

Examining the interviewees' two turns, the second and fourth turns revealed simply that all responses resulted in responses which were perceived by the interviewer to be in the category 4 illustrating comprehension.

Sequence Combinations

Investigating all the 23 communicative breakdowns across the four turns taken showed the following:

7 sequences followed the IEi - C - Cl - ✓ pattern,

4 sequences followed the IEi - L - R - ✓ pattern,

4 sequences followed the IEi - L - Cl - ✓ pattern,

3 sequences followed the IEi - L - A - ✓ pattern,

3 sequences followed the IEc - L - R - ✓ pattern,

1 sequence followed the IEc - L - A - ✓ pattern, and

1 sequence the IIac + IIaa - L - R - ✓ pattern.

Question-related analysis

Analysing the questions variable in the data shows that question 2, elicited by the common (in this interview) informative question form, concerning memorisation of vocabulary at school resulted in 5 miscomprehensions, all of them linguistic in nature and connected with the interviewer's use mostly of the idiomatic expression "by heart" and lesser so the verb "memorise". In 4 of these 5 cases, the repair was executed by rephrasing the same initiation - a rephrased re-initiation. In one sequence with Mingmanee, the student guessed the meaning of the linguistically misunderstood initiation herself - an interviewee-initiated case of repair needing only an acknowledgement by the interviewer in the third turn.

11 questions were associated with question 4 concerning the more abstract concept of student learning strategies. As many as 7 responses showed conceptual misunderstanding (2 responses were unclear as to whether they were linguistic or conceptual) and 4 (possibly 6) were linguistic-based. Of particular note, interviewer initiations asking how

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students read all resulted in conceptual misunderstanding, the word "strategies" was linguistically difficult to understand. Interestingly, Mingmanee again guessed the meaning of "strategies", repairing the miscommunication by herself through the Thai-English use of the loan word "policy".

Questions 5, 8 and 9 occurred not at the beginning of topic boundaries as all other questions, but were nevertheless attempts by the interviewer to concept check (coded as Initiation : Elicit: confirm) a previous interviewee utterance. These were in all three cases without success as the language of concept-checking involved linguistically difficult lexis - "reference", "atmosphere", and "self-responsibility".

The four miscomprehensions in question 10 involved the use of either the verb "organise" or the noun "organisation", resulting in 3 (perhaps 4) cases of linguistic difficulty.

In terms of repair undertaken by interviewees, of the 23 sequences taken, there were 6 attempts to guess the meaning themselves. The interviewer himself repaired potential miscomprehension only once in the 23 initiations by rephrasing "by heart" as "to memorise".

Contextual information

As well as the quantitative analysis of the turns, it is necessary to supplement the data with more contextual background information. This may assist in the understanding of the breakdown sequences at the deeper level.

This information should be related to the interviewer's background, status, location relative to the interviewees, the interviewees' background, and the nature of the interview itself. Some of the criteria

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outlined by van Dijk (1977), the "tactics" and "strategies" of Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991), the "contextualisation cues" of Gumperz (1982) and various Thai behavioural factors will be considered.

The male teacher-researcher status (in fact Head of Academic Studies-researcher) clearly placed the interviewees in a turn-taking setting which lacked parity and was overwhelmingly "asymmetrical" (Spradley 1979: 67). The Thai deferential treatment of foreign teachers, noted by great exhibition of politeness (Hawkey and Nakornchai 1980), involves typically a large "power distance index" (Hofstede 1986) whereby individual expression by the student is uncommon. This would suggest that Thai students in this interviewee role in such a relationship with the foreign teacher-researcher will not exhibit "challenge, change, and a critical attitude" (Redmont 1998: 18). The concept of "krengjai" (Holmes and Tangtongtavy 1995: 90) - the "reluctance to disturb" authority figures may account for interview exchanges in which little direct and negative feedback is given. Redmont (ibid.) notes that Thais value harmony in relationships to such an extent that great efforts are made to avoid disagreement by either participant in verbal exchanges. Furthermore, there is an expectation among Thais that the authority figure will show a benign, "merciful and kind" attitude to subordinates (Holmes and Tangtongtavy op. cit.: 31). This would perhaps tend to explain more clearly the absence of interviewee responding turns which avoid the use of potentially face-threatening language such as "I don't understand", "What do you mean ?" or "Can you explain that ?" Most responding turns pragmatically repeated the misunderstood lexical item (s) or attempted repair (for example, in "You mean to memorise ?" by Mingmanee and "You mean an objective ?" by Chinh, see Appendix).

However, the absence of challenging or critical responses could also be viewed as potentially detrimental to the collection of valuable data, thereby showing also that the "different orders of constraint" (Pomerantz and Fehr 1997: 64) endemic in interviewing is accentuated to a negative degree by Thai participants not sharing the same "patterning of interview conventions" (Akinnaso and Ajirotutu 1982: 123) as the interviewer.

Gumper2's (ibid.) "contextualisation cues" in the casual conversational setting imply that a shared understanding of the clues made by the speaker result in "smooth" interaction. I would argue that the smoothness of interaction in the Thai context would be more a case of Thais retaining their own extreme sensitivity to the context, the role and the expectations emanating from those criteria rather than those student-interviewees adopting the western interviewer's "clues" to openly challenge the questions and think critically in abstract terms. From the data, it is clear that the interviewer's desire to enable interviewees to express themselves assertively was not necessarily successful, despite the seemingly successful repair. This was due to some degree to the Thai students' reluctance perhaps to disturb smooth interaction (for example, "Umm (smiles) I very bad" by Nawarat, question 10). This may account for the fact that all 23 communicative breakdowns were repaired in only four turns.

The "tactics" (Larsen-Freeman and Long ibid.) of the NS-interviewer to enact repair after breakdown must be seen in light of the Thai interviewees' sense of responsibility to avoid lengthy breakdown It could therefore be implied that the "strategies" (ibid.) to "avoid such a breakdown occurring" are more NNS-driven than Larsen-Freeman and

Long suggest. Clearly, there may be cultural criteria (Schegloff 2000) continually underpinning exchanges beyond the NS-interviewer's control.

Conclusions and implications for interviewing in the Thai context

The conclusions to be drawn from my data firstly concern the type of turns taken in the four-part exchange. Notably, of the 15 linguistic miscomprehensions, 8 were repaired by rephrasing the initiating move. 4 of the 5 conceptual miscomprehensions were, in contrast, repaired by providing clues, examples of what was originally asked. A high proportion, 11 of the 19 initiations in the elicit: informative category, were not linguistically understood, as were all 3 initiations in the elicit: confirm category. 5 of the 19 initiations in the elicit; informative category were conceptually unclear, representing all of the conceptual miscomprehensions recorded. 6 of the 9 rephrased re-initiations originated from the common initiations in the elicit: informative group. All clues made in the repair turn too originated from the same category of initiations.

The fact that most breakdown was caused by linguistic problems (15 out of the 23) leads us to conclude that clearer, perhaps less idiomatic - for example, Appendix question 2 "by heart" is not understood four times - and less technical - for example "strategies" - vocabulary could have been more effective. Conceptually, though, the questions concerning learning strategies, particularly in question 4, posed some degree of difficulty. The awareness of one's own cognitive strategies in learning may have represented the greatest difficulty for students as "abstract" (Fieg, loc. cit.) themes of this nature would be

potentially problematic for even non-Thai interviewees. In terms of the kind of repair undertaken, there appears to have been a balance between rephrasing the initiations and offering clues, most of the former being used for linguistic and the latter for conceptual miscomprehensions. Although most the initiating moves were in the elicit: informative category, an assessment of their effectiveness needs to be made in relation to the twenty interviews conducted as an entirety rather than the communicative breakdown alone.

An analysis of the four turns as sequences reveals that the most common combination (7 out of the 23) was an Initiation: Elicit: informative - Conceptual miscomprehension - Clue - comprehension. Four involved the same initiation but with an inserted sequence of linguistic miscomprehension followed by rephrased re-initiations, leading to comprehension. Another four sequences entailed similar initiations but with linguistic miscomprehensions repaired by means of clues. Typically then, most sequences had similar initiations, followed by mostly linguistic or some conceptual miscomprehensions, and were repaired by mostly clues, although rephrased re-initiations were used to repair other combinations. Repair of miscomprehension was sometimes undertaken by interviewees within their own turns (often by means of "You mean....?" see Appendices) representing a helpful contribution to the overall discourse maintenance.

Finally, linking these quantitative conclusions to the qualitative perspectives of the cultural and contextual information underpinning the interviews shows firstly that the communicative breakdowns were perhaps unusually short, a point discussed previously as possibly emanating from the Thai (and Vietnamese) interviewees' deference to

authority and reluctance to make the interviewer lose face. Their "communicative norms" (Briggs 1986: 2) seem to be operating as an undercurrent throughout the interviewing process, giving perhaps an impression of falsely shared "schema" (Tannen and Wallat 1993: 73) with the native speaker interviewer. Indeed, the expectation by the interviewees of formal and "ritualised and formulaic moves can provide a framework for the preservation of face" (Schiffrin as cited in McKay and Hornberger 1996: 310). This is perhaps in contrast to the interviewer's attempts to de-formalise the interviewing process. Although difficult to prove, the data provided in the communicative breakdowns could possibly therefore present a "distorted" (Spradley 1979: 20) view of, in this case, Thai and south-east Asian learning strategies. This would imply that translation of the informants' input by conducting ethnographic interviews in English is to be avoided, yet it is perhaps doubtful whether speaking Thai (or Vietnamese or Korean) would change this distortion as the status of the interviewer's role, position and status before the interviewees would remain as a constant handicap.

In conclusion, the analysis of communicative breakdown in this case study has been valuably assisted by the triangulation of turn-taking coding, admittedly "induced from the data" (Taylor and Cameron 1987: 53), and contextual and cultural information specific to the Thai setting. The not insignificant presence in the data of a Vietnamese student's breakdown sequences may present a slight adulteration of the mostly Thai cultural factors discussed. I would consider the addition of such data to be a valuable supplement to this research and a possible indicator to commonalities shared between Thai and Vietnamese turn-

taking behaviour in interviews if further research were to be undertaken across a broader selection of south-east Asian students. In sum, the triangulation of research methods has provided a more useful insight into "what is really going on" (ibid.) not only in the communicative breakdown, but in the interviewing at large among all the nationalities participating in the process.

Appendices

Communicative breakdown and repair exchanges

Question & student	Interviewer's turn	Code	Interviewee's responding turn	Code	Interviewer's repair turn	Code	Interviewee's response	Code
2 with Chinh	What did you learn by heart?	IEi	By heart?	L	Yes, I mean, what did you have to remember?	R	Oh, the teacher, she gave many things- words - to remember.	✓
2 with Sangdaew	What did you learn by heart?	IEi	By heart?	L	Yes, by heart...I mean...what did you have to memorise?	R	Oh, I see...I remember I have...had to remember five words each time..	✓
2 with Mingmanee	...what kind of things did you have to learn by heart?	IEi	By heart? You mean to memorise?	L	Yes, that's right..	A	I understand... yes...I...my teacher gave us some words to remember.	✓
2 with Komkrit	...what kind of things did your teacher give you to learn by heart...I mean to memorise?	IEi	Memorise?	L	Yes, I mean...to remember for a test the next day, say.	R	Oh, I see...I...not really...no, not next day, but for entrance examination, yes.	✓
2 with Srinart	...did your teacher give you things to learn by heart?	IEi	By heart?	L	Yes, I mean to memorise...to remember for a test later.	R	I see..yes, I remember every week, mostly vocabulary.	✓

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4 with Chinh	IEi	...before you listen to something, do you think about what you are going to listen for?	C	You mean an objective?	Yes, perhaps, or also, what you think you are going to generally hear.	A + Cl	I see..yes, I think I do because in English I want to guess about what I maybe hear.	✓
4 with Serm	IEi	...think for example about how you listen.	L	Listen...you mean hear, right?	Yes, I mean before you go to see a movie, do you think about what you are going to be hearing before you go... about the story perhaps?	A + Cl	Oh yes...like I read the newspaper about the story.	✓
4 with Nawarat	IEi	...do you have any special strategy of, say, reading?	C	Reading? Yes. (looks a little unsure)	I mean when the teacher gives you something to read, do you read every word?	Cl	Yes, most times... but I know that I sometimes do not... I try to understand the story and so it doesn't matter to understand every word always.	✓
4 with Rewat	IEi	...how do you read?	C	How do I read, sir?	Yes, I mean, do you read every word of an English text?	Cl	Yes, sir, every word so I can to understand everything.	✓
4 with Srinart	IEi	...how do you, for example, read in English?	C	Read?	Yes, I mean, do you read every word of a text or book?	Cl	It dependa...	✓

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4 with Chinh	IEc	...OK, she taught you to scan.	L	Yes, it's what we say when we read through quickly for just a small piece of information.	R	Yes.	>
4 with Chinh	IEi	...and how do you get ready to write an essay?	C or L	(unsure look)	R	Oh, yes...well... I think about the problem and...	>
4 with Mingmanee	IEi	...what strategies do you use to communicate in English?	L	You mean what kind of policy I have? Policy? Oh, I see, yes. That's right. Go on.	A	My policy is to look every word...	>
4 with Arunee	IEi	...what are your strategies in English?	C or L	You mean what I do? Yes, maybe I should be clearer here. First of all, how do you read English texts? Do you read every word?	Cl	I see...well, I don't read every word unless...	>
4 with Komkrit	IEi	Let's change the topic now by asking you about the best way to learn English?	C	The best way to learn English? Yes, I mean if someone saks you how to learn to read, speak, write... or listen, hat would you say?	Cl	I think best way is no fear.	>
4 with Srinart	IEi	...and asks you for advice.	L	Advice? Yes, he...or she asks you the best way to study English. What do you say?	R	Well, I say to him that he should speak very often...	>

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5 with Orathai	IEc	*You mean tha reference, perhaps?*	L	*The reference? I don't know...I mean the book the teacher want us to read...*	A	*Yes, that's what I mean...we say the references.*	*Yes, so I ask teachers...you are sure about this*	✓
8 with Krissada	IEc	*so, if someone is lazy, for example, then it spoils the atmosphere?*	L	*Err... atmosphere?*	R	*Oh, right, atmosphere, I mean the group feeling.*	*I see.yes.*	✓
9 with Kik	IIac + IIaa	*That's good advice. It's always good when students have self-responsibility.*	L	*Self-resp....?*	R	*Oh, self-responsibility ...it mean taking care of your own study like your father advised you.*	*I see.*	✓
10 with Rungnapa	IEi	*I'd like to talk now about how you organise yourself.*	L	*Organise?*	Cl	*Yes, organise...I mean, do you have note-books and files for your studies?*	*Yes, here in my bag.*	✓
10 with Sangdaew	IEi	*I'd like to talk about your organisation in your studies.*	L	*My organisation?*	Cl	*Yes, I mean how you write your notes.*	*Oh, I see. I have different...*	✓
10 with Mingmanee	IEi	*I'd like to talk about your organisation.*	L	*My organisation? (unsure look)*	Cl	*Yes, your note-books and files...to see if you keep your notes in good order.*	*Oh, I see.*	✓
10 with Nawarat	IEi	*Tell me, are you well-organised?*	L or C	*Well-organised? You mean my schedule?*	R + Cl	*Ah well, not quite... schedules are part of what I mean, but first of all I want to sak you about your notes and files...are you a good organiser in your studies?*	*Umm (smiles) I very bad.*	✓

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