Oral Skills – A Need for Acceptance of L1 Cultural Norms

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ABSTRAK

Kertas ini menyelidik ujaran jenis bantahan (the speech act of disagreement) yang digunakan oleh 248 mahasiswa di Fakulti Ekonomi, Universiti Malaya, semasa mereka mengambil peperiksaan lisan yang dijalankan selama tiga minggu. Peperiksaan dijalankan dalam kumpulan empat orang dan setiap orang diberikan satu situasi. Setiap pelajar diberi satu opsyen dan mereka mesti membincangkan kebaikan opsyen tersebut. Selepas 20 minit membentangkan ide mereka (setiap orang lima minit), mereka harus berbincang secara kumpulan untuk memilih opsyen yang terbaik. Di dalam perbincangan mereka, mereka menggunakan ujaran jenis persetujuan, bantahan, ujaran separa persetujuan, ujaran separa bantahan dan sebagainya. Kesemua jenis ujaran (speech acts) ini telah pun didedahkan kepada pelajar di dalam kelas. Secara amnya, ramai pelajar tidak menggunakan corak yang diajarkan di dalam kelas seperti "I disagree", "Your idea is ludicrous", "You are wrong" dan sebagainya. Malah mereka kurang menggunakan perkataan yang secara langsung menunjukkan bantahan yang selalunya mencerminkan norma ujaran bantahan dalam bahasa pertama yang paling nyata. Corak yang sedemikian adalah betul dari segi nahu dan diterima dari segi sosiolinguistik di persekitaran Malaysia/Asia. Penulis membuat satu kes bagi penerimaan pertukaran budaya pertama kepada bahasa kedua dan berpandangan bahawa norma tersebut harus ditonjolkan di dalam bahan-bahan pengajaran khususnya bagi pengajaran bahasa.

ABSTRACT

The use of the first language cultural norms in the second language was tested during a three week oral examination from the language used by 248 undergraduates in the Faculty of Economics, University of Malaya. The speech act of disagreement taught in the classroom ranged from direct disagreement (emphatic and assertive) to less direct ways of disagreement such as partial disagreement, partial agreement to agreement. Each group of four students had to choose the suitable speech from disagreement options. The analysis showed that about 78% of the students used indirect means of disagreement and of the 20% who used direct disagreement only about 3% used the more assertive utterances of disagreement. The less 'assertive' statements reflecting the norm of disagreement in the first language were often used. Such patterns are grammatically correct and sociolinguistically acceptable within the Malaysian/Asian environment. In fact, the more assertive forms would be considered rude and 'kasar' (rough). The writers therefore strongly recommend the acceptance of the first language cultural norms into the second language and are of the view that such norms should be reflected in language teaching instructional materials.

INTRODUCTION

Language is an integral aspect of culture. The cultural context consists of two components – the psychological and sociological, the former is represented by the values, beliefs and attitudes, and the latter by the sociolinguistic variables, such as who is speaking to whom, about what, where etc i.e. questions of approriacy and correctness. Language therefore is not the same in all cultures. Malaysia is a multiracial, multicultural nation which comprises Malays, Chinese, Indians and other indigenous groups. Research on the pragmatics of cross cultural communication in a Malaysian context indicates that Malays, Chinese and Indians appear to have assimilated cultural norms of speaking especially in the area of disagreement and indirectness (Jamaliah Mohd. Ali, 1991a). It appears therefore that "a Malaysian cultural ethos

has emerged which transcends ethnic differences" (Khemlani-David: 1992a).

The first language culture in Malaysia refers to a culture which comprises predominantly of the Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultures. In Malaysia, the notion of face is very important in interpersonal communications. Malaysians use circumlocution and indirectness in their conversational style in an attempt to "save face." Jamaliah Mohd. Ali (1991a) provides a reason for this use of indirectness. She states "one of its main intentions is conflict avoidance." On Malay language, Clifford and Swettenham (cited in Brown: 1951) state that the second language is "essentially a diplomatic language and one admirably adapted for concealing the feelings and cloaking the real thoughts." Silence is of course the ultimate recourse for avoiding conflict. Unfortunately, our students could not use this strategy in the examination and had to resort to other strategies such as indirectness.

In the Asian society, "saving face" is important in order to avoid conflict and to maintain social harmony. Indirect communication is an important aspect of Asian culture. Jamaliah Mohd. Ali (1991b) states that "only a part of meaning resides in the words spoken, the LARGEST (our emphasis) part is communicated by hints, assumptions, innuendoes, and audience filling in from context and prior knowlegde."

In the second language context, it is important to determine what the goal of language teaching is. According to Nattinger (1977) "we must concern ourselves not only with the functions but also the ways and the means by which these functions are realized across cultures." If for instance, the aim is for a learner to use the second language to communicate with the native speaker it is the writers' contention that a knowledge of both the target language and the socio-pragmatic rules of that language must be taught. However, if the goal is to have a knowledge of the second language for communication within the home country, i.e. Malaysia, then we are of the view that the socio-pragmatic rules of the first language must prevail, even though the language used

may be a second language (Table 1). In a study on compliments used by speakers of Malaysian English it is found that the learners appear to display significant use of the Malaysian value system although they are not using their mother tongue (Khemlani-David, 1992b).

This paper examines the forms of disagreement found in the speech of undergraduates of the Faculty of Economics at the University of Malaya, with a view to determine whether the first language cultural norms have been transferred into the second language.

Examples of the first language with socio-cultural influence in communication were taken from local dramas broadcasted in the local television stations. The data indicate that disagreement is seldom directly expressed especially among the Malay speakers. Rather it tends to be more indirect and is expressed in severeal ways (Table 2).

Body language is also used to indicate disagreement and indirectness. Indirectness amongst the Malays was clearly portrayed in the T.V. dramas. In order to indicate disagreement, for instance, they would shake their heads shrugging their shoulders, or smiling and avoiding eye contact to signal disagreement.

Sociolinguistic norms are an important facet of communicative competence and when a second language is learnt, often sociolinguistic norms or ways of expressing opinions are transferred from the native culture to the second language which is English. This, at times leads to 'accusations' of non-assertiveness and cross cultural misunderstanding by native speakers of English.

The writers contend that in interlingual communication within the Asian region where common sociolinguistic norms prevail and where English is used as an international language for communication it is vital that such first language norms remain in the second language discourse. Second language teachers of English therefore should be sensitive to and aware of the first language cultural norm transfers in the second language.

TABLE I

Socio-pragmatic rules of communication

L2	=	L2 grammar syntax lexical items	+	L2 sociolinguistic norms of where, when, what about, why, etc.	=	Cross Cultural Competence (English used with native speakers of the target language.)
L2	=	L2 grammar syntax lexical items	+	L1 sociolinguistic norms of where, when, what about, why, etc.	=	Use of L2 in a multilingual society where English is a medium of communication but not a native language in the Asian setting.

L1 = first language
L2 = second language

TABLE 2

Direct and indirect forms of disagreement

I. Direct and less direct ways of disagreement.

a) The use of apologetic preface.

Aku minta maaf jika aku terkasar tadi tetapi
I ask forgiveness if I rough just now but

sememangnya aku tidak setuju sungguh dengan
actually I don't agree fullheartedly with

apa yang kau cadangkan itu.
what which you proposed that.

–I apologise if I appeared rude but actually I disagree
completely with your proposal.

b) The use of a verb softener.

Saya rasa saya tidak setuju.
I feel I don't agree.
–I *think** I don't agree.
**think* here is used intentionally to soften the disagreement.

c) The use of initial agreement followed by a contrast (disagreement) marker in a statement.

Aku akan turutkan kehendak engkau tu tetapi ingat,
I will obey wishes yours but remember

aku tak suka melakukannya.
I don't like doing so.

—I will abide by your wishes but remember I don't like doing so.

Saya setuju dengan cadangan abang tu tapi kita harus
I agree with proposal brother yours but we must

fikir tentang akibatnya nanti.
think about consequences later.

—I agree with your proposal but we must consider future consequences.

d) The use of a question form expressing doubt.

Tidakkah kau rasa yang perbuatan mu itu akan
Don't you think which action yours that will

mencemarkan kebersihan kampung kita?
pollute cleanliness village ours?

—Don't you think your action will pollute our village?

Apa kata kalau mereka tak suka dengan pilihan
What say if they don't like with choice

mak tu?
mother your?

—What if they dislike your (the mother) choice?

e) The use of a contrast marker with a question form indicating disagreement.

Tetapi tidakkah kau terfikir yang akibat perbuatan kau tu
But don't you think which consequences action yours

akan merosakkan nama baik keluarga kita?
will spoil name good family ours?

-But don't you think your action will have consequences which will damage our family name.

f) The use of 'don't think' and 'because' (providing a reason).

Saya rasa perkara itu tidak menjadi masalah kerana kalau
I feel matter that don't become problem because if

sama-sama berusaha tentunya projek itu akan berjaya.
together work surely project that will be successful.

—I don't think that issue is a problem because if we work hard
together definitely the project will be successful.

II. Questioning strategies suggesting doubt or disagreement.

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a) The use of "how".

Kita tahu yang penghulu kampung ini sudah
We know that head of the village this finish

bersubahat dengan komunis jadi bagaimana harus kita
accomplice with communist so how will we

singkirkan dia?
dispose him?"

– We know that the head of the village has ties with the communists so how do we dispose of him?

b) The use of "why".

Cuba kau fikir masak-masak tentang cadangan bapak tu.
Try you think cook about proposal father your.

-Why don't you think about father's proposal carefully?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The objective of this study was to examine the use of the first language cultural norms in the second language by analyzing the language used by undergraduates of the Faculty of Economics, University of Malaya during an oral examination. The focus of this research was to examine and analyse the speech act of disagreement. Students had been taught a range of speech acts e.g. greetings, complimenting, agreeing, disagreeing etc. over a period of two semesters and it was hypothesized that less assertive forms of disagreement, which are a reflection of the first language culture will be used in the second language.

The speech act of disagreement of 248 undergraduates of the Faculty of Economics, University of Malaya was analysed during a three week oral examination conducted in February/March 1992. The oral examination comprised of 20% of the total examination and a written component of 80%.

Students were tested in groups of four, and in the first part of the examination they had to make a presentation for five minutes each. They had to discuss the advantages of the option offered in a case. After a five minute presentation by each student, the group concluded on the best option. The role of the examiners was to remain silent and to act as facilitators only when a need arose, for example when the student required help; in understanding a lexical term in the question or deviated completely from the option.

The aim of the oral examination was to evaluate the student's ability to choose a specific suggestion or option from those preset by the examiners, and also to examine the students; ability to discuss the pros and cons of the options and come to a conclusion as to the best solution to a specific situation.

RESULTS

A list of the range and frequency of ways the students disagreed is shown in Tables 3, 4 and 5.

Out of the 113 utterances indicating disagreement, only one-fifth was direct. About 78% of the students used indirect means of disagreement. Even among the 20% who used the direct language of disagreement, the more assertive utterances indicating disagreement were used very minimally – about 3%. For example:

> I don't agree with you entirely.
> I oppose it.

Indirect speech acts of disagreement appeared in two forms:

I. With the use of softeners – refer to Table 4.
II. Questioning strategies – refer to Table 5.

Speakers used a number of verbal strategies to lessen the intensity or "soften" their disagreement. Note for example, the use of the less assertive and more polite model "may" in Table 4; even though during the instructional phase the whole range of forms

TABLE 3

Direct ways of disagreement.

WAYS OF DISAGREEMENT	FREQUENCY
A. Direct	
a) The use of "don't agree"	
i. I don't agree with you...	13
ii. I don't agree with your comment/proposal/points	4
iii. I still don't agree with your suggestion.	2
iv. I don't agree with you entirely.	2
v. I oppose it.	1
Total	22

TABLE 4

Less direct ways of disagreement.

WAYS OF DISAGREEMENT	FREQUENCY
B. Less Direct – use of softeners	
a) The use of initial agreement followed by contrast (disagreement marker)	
i. I agree but you must remember...	1
ii. I agree with you but...	5
iii. I also agree with you but...	2
iv. I think the trip is interesting but...	1
v. It is a very good idea but...	3
vi. You may have a point there even though...	1
vii. I see this as a short term strategy, on the other hand...	1
Total	14
b) The use of a verb softener	
i. I think it is not advisable at this moment...	3
ii. I think settling loans is not a very good way.	2
iii. I think your suggestion is not relevant.	1
iv. I think your misunderstood...	1
v. So I think the suggestion is not very good.	1
Total	8
c) The use of "don't think..." and providing a reason	
i. I don't think... because...	7
ii. I don't think so... because...	4
iii. So I don't think this is a good recommendation because...	2
Total	13
d) The use of "don't think" without providing a reason	
i. I don't think...	3
ii. I don't think so.	4

iii. I don't think we need to find...   2

iv. I don't think it is a perfect figure.   1

    Total   10

e) The use of a contrast marker in a statement

    i.   But you must consider...   2

    ii.   But the disadvantages are also many.   2

    iii.   But from my point of view...   1

    iv.   But sometimes the customers think that...   1

    v.   But you have to think in terms of...   1

    vi.   But I think we have a lot of timber industry so we don't need others.   1

    Total   8

f) The use of a contrast marker in a question form

    i.   But what about...?   3

    ii.   But don't you think...?   4

    iii.   But do you think...?   1

    Total   8

g) The use of a question form without a contrast marker

    i.   Don't you think you ought to consider...?   3

    ii.   Don't you think that by providing...?   2

    iii.   Don't you think that retrenchment should be the last resort?   1

    Total   6

h) The use of adverbial 'softeners'

    i.   I don't really agree with you.   3

    ii.   I don't quite agree with you.   1

    Total   4

i) Providing arguments without directly disagreeing

    i.   You can't use synthetic rubber because...   1

    ii.   We don't have to depend on... because...   1

    iii.   See we should consider... because...   1

    Total   3

j) The use of an apologetic preface

    i.   Excuse me, I think you are wrong.   1

    ii.   Excuse me, I can't really follow your point.   1

    iii.   May I know why you said that...   1

    Total   3

TABLE 5
Questioning strategies suggesting doubt/disagreement.

WAYS OF DISAGREEMENT	FREQUENCY
C. Questioning strategies suggesting doubt/disagreement	
a) The use of "how"	
i. How about...?	2
ii. How do you intend to...?	2
iii. So how do...?	1
iv. We know... so how to...?	1
Total	6
b) The use of "why"	
i. Why don't you look at it his way?	1
ii. Why don't you consider my point?	1
iii. So why must we...?	1
iv. I feel we shouldn't... so why don't we...?	1
Total	4
c) The use of questions focusing on weakness of arguments	
i. Have you ever thought of...?	1
ii. Have you considered...?	1
iii. What about sugar?	1
iv. What if they don't like the sample?	1
Total	4
Total number of ways of disagreement	113

including the more assertive forms of disagreement had been taught.

Table 4 shows the range of verbal forms used to soften disagreement. It is clear that our sample of Malaysian speakers of English are ambivalent when disagreeing and show a great deal of sensitivity to the interlocutor or speaker who is making a suggestion. This is indicated by framing the speech act of disagreement, by initially agreeing with the speaker before expressing disagreement. Malaysians tend to circumlocute before coming to the point so as to save face and make the proposer feel good. The speaker then states his view which is contrary to his earlier utterance. Incidently, it is important to highlight that contrast markers like *however, on the other hand, alternatively, even though,* *although* and so forth which had been taught were not used. Instead most of the students use the contrast marker but 85% that is 12 out of 14 times. This reflects the student's limited proficiency of the target language.

The student tends to regress and slips back into using more comfortable, familiar and easier lexical items even though they have knowledge of other contrast markers such as *even though* and *on the other hand* etc which were minimally used.

CONCLUSION

What emerged from this analysis is that the students in general avoided the use of the more emphatic *I disagree* and instead, resorted to the less assertive and indirect ways of disagreement. It is vital that in learning a

second language, especially if the goal is for internal communication that is within the society where the second language is being taught, that the first language norms prevail in the second language speech. Culture and language cannot be isolated and in Malaysian culture, the different speech acts are manifestations of the culture. The politeness strategies used by the second language speakers must be fostered and maintained. The writers recommend that local teachers be alert and sensitive to such socio-pragmatic transfers of the first language in the second language speech.

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