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HUMANITAS is published by Faculty of Culture Studies, University of Brawijaya, Malang.
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CONVERGING AND DIVERGING IN EFL SPEAKING CLASS

Eni Maharsi*

Abstract

This paper discusses the adjustments the teachers should make in their in-classroom setting which contribute to the improvement of students’ performance in the EFL class. The adjustments are shown through the application of Communicative Accommodation Theory (CAT) to the teaching and learning of speaking English as a foreign language. CAT deals with linguistic variation, more specifically, with the results of adjustments and accommodations made by the teachers and students during the communication process. The adjustments are convergent in which both parties try to obtain the addressee’s approval and/or to promote communicative efficiency; both tend to adjust their discourse to each other aiming at intelligibility through mutual identification. Maintaining a positive social identity is seen as divergent. This paper calls the attention to the implementation of CAT and highlights the importance of an adequate CAT application for improving students’ performance speaking course in English as foreign language setting.

Keywords: communication accommodation, EFL, teaching speaking

Our style of speech changes at any times, depending on various variables such as the setting, the topic of the discourse, the person we are interacting with, and the purpose of the interaction. For instance, we tend to speak more slowly when conversing with foreigners, or use grammatically simpler foreign language with beginning level students of foreign language. In most EFL classes, the teachers frequently have to make more effort to invite the students with the least performance to speak more. Those students’ innate awareness might say that even the most trivial aspects of speech can take on crucial importance in their process of learning to speak English. It stands to reason that teachers should, among other things, modify their discourse by which then the mutual pedagogical goals of both teachers and students can be achieved. This, in other words, means that teachers accommodate to students by adjusting their communication behavior to the requisite roles that both the teachers and students as the participants are assigned in a given context. It is in this light that accommodation theory has become an important issue in teaching and learning a foreign language.

This paper highlights the adjustments the teachers can make in their communication with students which contribute to the improvement of students’ performance in the EFL speaking classes: Understanding adjustments in communication can be explained and analyzed using Giles’ Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). Communication happens through adjustments. It means that both interlocutors will modify their behavior and discourse in order to be understood. The interlocutors will have to make adjustments in their speech for the sake of communication efficiency. These adjustments are studied by the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT).

CAT studies the discursive varia-

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tions which result from the adjustments or accommodations the speakers do in their speech. Accommodations may happen according to the interlocutors’ personal characteristics, general speech style, specific linguistic usage, as well as their values and intentions. The speech adjustments aim at the following goals: (1) evoking the addressee’s social approval, (2) promoting communicative efficiency between interlocutors and (3) maintaining a positive social identity (Souza). The two first goals can be considered convergent since they seek an effective communication; the speaker tries to find identification with the listener. The identification between the interlocutors characterizes an internal interaction since they are cooperatively seeking mutual intelligibility. Both use their knowledge of the language during the discourse aiming at a mutual goal, without considering external influences. On the other hand, maintaining a positive social identity would be considered divergent because it intends to keep an identity with a reference group. Keeping an identity with their L1, for instance, characterizes an external interaction since the interlocutors have external influences to the discourse. Convergence, according to Giles and Powesland (1997:224), is the act of converging or attuning our speech towards others when we wish to signal in-group solidarity or express personal affiliation. Further Giles and Powesland add that convergence and high attuning are typical of many cooperative interpersonal encounters and can attenuate communicative differences. It can also bring people closer psychologically. Both speaker and listener share a cooperative behavior which leads them to convergence in their speech. Maintaining a positive social identity is seen as divergent because the speaker wants to keep an identity with a reference group. In this situation the interlocutors behave competitively diverging from each other by emphasizing the differences in their speech.

To communicate effectively, speaker and listener should converge in their mutual goal to accomplish intelligibility. The speakers involved in this process are expected to work upon these adjustments according to the communicative situation in which they find themselves. The pedagogical implications of CAT are quite apparent. Teachers who are aware of problems involving intelligibility (or lack of it) may be better prepared to accommodate to their students to accomplish better performances in an international environment otherwise.

METHOD

The data used in this paper were gathered through actual recordings of interactions among students in speaking class of lower intermediate level, the actual observations in speaking classes, and interview with eight lecturers. The recorded actual conversations were transcribed for analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students’ Anxiety

It is important to visit the students’ anxiety since applying CAT, that is both teachers and students converge and diverge to each other, is believed to reduce the tension of students’ anxiety. According to Papamahieli (Papamahieli, 2002:331), as quoted by Marwan (2008:120) anxiety; in general, can be associated with “threats to self-efficacy and appraisals of situations as threatening.” Papamahieli further divides the anxiety into two types: state anxiety and trait anxiety. State anxiety is occurs because learners are exposed to particular conditions or situations. For example, there are learners who may feel anxious if they are requested to speak in front of the class or if they do not understand many of the teachers’ words during the class. Meanwhile, trait anxiety is a person’s tendency to feel anxious regardless of the situations to which they are exposed. In regard to this, Worde (1998) as quoted by Marwan (2008:120) argues that trait anxiety is a part of somebody’s character and is a permanent disorder.

Regarding Indonesia EFL learners in the English Department of Brawijaya University, the impression that I have drawn from experience as an English teacher is that both
students and my fellow teachers seem to realize the importance of English as an international language. Most students have already learnt the language in order to communicate with people whose L1 is other than English, although they do that unconsciously. However, there is still anxiety in their learning. In the light of students’ anxiety to speak foreign language, Marwan finds out that there are three factors the learners in a state polytechnics believe have contributed to their FL anxiety (Marwan, 2008:123). Those factors are lack of preparation, lack of confidence, and fear of failing the class (Marwan, 2008:124). Similar factors appear to trigger the anxiety of the students taking speaking course of lower intermediate level in Brawijaya University as well. Results of observations, recordings, and interviews with the students reveal that they have difficulties in:

1. Understanding long, complex sentences. This leads to difficulty to produce long and complex sentences. The sentences uttered are apparent in their production of simple sentences with repeated subjective pronouns. For example, I went to Yogyakarta last holiday. I went there with my friends. I enjoyed the trip because I and my friends met foreigners there....

2. Limited vocabulary. For instance, there is confusion in applying the right predicate. Thus, the verbs present and explain function as predicate are said as presentation and explanation.

3. Poor listening skills and concentration span. Poor listening can cause difficulty in understanding instruction given verbally by the teacher, while poor concentration span can affect students’ attention to their classmates’ performance.

4. Lack of confidence in abilities.

5. Inappropriate patterns of communication, e.g. talking too loudly or too slowly, rigidity in their routines with lack of patience & flexibility to adapt

6. Possible accompanying behaviour difficulties, e.g. avoiding eye contact with the teacher

Applying CAT to the Classroom

Applying CAT in EFL class room setting is believed to reduce students’ anxiety and improve their performance in the speaking class. In addition, developing accommodation skills in the L2 among the students would help teachers to support them to achieve improvement focusing on mutual intelligibility. Teachers should give feedback and discuss with the group about the students performance during the activity. Teachers ought to motivate learners to pay attention to intelligibility problems asking them where these problems mainly happened, during the speaker’s production or the listener’s reception. This way learners may become aware of their ‘errors’ and, in a second moment improve their performance, not converging towards a fluency standard, but towards their interlocutor. The teachers of speaking course of lower intermediate level in Brawijaya University have convergence. Some teachers apply successful CAT activities with EFL learners by implementing the following three convergences and divergence for helping students to learn to perform successfully.

Convergence 1: Enhance communication, understanding and learning

In addition to academic benefits, implementing CAT can help teachers to accommodate communication and behaviour styles that cannot be changed and to encourage students to accommodate to teacher. The points below are what the teachers do to enhance communication, understanding and learning of their students. The points are adapted from Maine.

1. Simplify vocabulary & sentence structure.
2. Slow down speech rate, longer/more pauses.
3. Support explanations with clear, attractive diagrams and text.
4. Pitch materials at student's level of abilities.
5. Match materials to student's personal interests, e.g. football topics, fashion, social network etc. 
6. Maintain level of routine for those unable to cope with change.

Convergence 2: Engender liking & approval
1. Share social situations, e.g. browsing materials for the assignment in wi-fi zone in which students work in group and teacher can just supervise the activity without really giving instruction.
2. Reciprocate smiling & eye contact. Even when the students avoid making eye contacts with the teacher during their performance either in front of the class or in group, teachers can keep maintaining eye contact with them.
3. Mirror gestures, e.g. thumbs up as a sign of appraisal.
4. Show interest and support in students’ interests or personal problems.

Convergence 3: Applying communicative activities in the classroom
The following activities are the how to applying CAT in the classroom as an attempt to develop convergence ability among students, as well as their awareness for more successful performance in speaking English.
1. Communicative tasks in pairs like filling in the gaps with the classmate’s information, dictations between learners, giving directions. Pair information exchange try to create a situation of real conversation in which interlocutors force each other to speak more comprehensibly and accurately. However, the assistance of the teacher here must be more required since learners sometimes do not see the relevance of the activity or get ashamed of speaking another language with the classmate for they share the same L1. This situation was overcome through raising learners’ awareness of the importance and relevance of the activity.
2. Role playing in order to explore more communication not rules, because rules are not the goal in an international context. Besides role playing, teachers also showed the learners how to really perform longer talk or reply instead of only producing short utterances or expressions.
3. To play CDs of short movies and invite discussion for review or problem finding. Through this exposure, teachers help learners to adjust their perception and realize the extent of expressing problem, consequently, they become more committed to their learning of speaking English.
4. Simplifying the grammar and diction is one way to accommodate teacher’s desire to get on well with the students and make them feel comfortable to perform more.
5. Holm 1992 (p. 231) notes that in multilingual country like Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia or India, with many varieties to choose from, people may accommodate to others by selecting the code that is most comfortable to the addressee. Thus, for non native English speaking teachers, to switch to L1 in for the explanation can be seen as another way of converging towards the speech of students. To encourage students to use English in this code-switch situation still can be considered converging by polite strategy. This way, students realized what has happened to English worldwide and got to their own conclusions. For the purposes to teach to speak English, one specific variety was be focused, that is English, and at the same time emphasize awareness and functional validity of other varieties. Teachers cannot merely expose students to varieties, they must be careful about what to show them in order to be reliable. Teachers’ attitudes must be linked to a predetermined purpose, which may be to develop students’ awareness of intelligibility problems as well as of English as an international language and all the implications it brings. Since students reach consciousness and be prepared through pedagogical work emphasizing speaking ability, they will be able to accommodate their speech and improve
their perform striving for an efficient communication.

Divergence in practice
A delicate diverging act needs applying by the teachers as a way of avoiding overaccommodating students. The divergence in practice was particularly done by correcting poor English. The following are the diverging acts done by the teachers.
1. Stress correct pronunciation of words, diction, grammar etc.
2. Stress importance of speaking and reading to reluctant speakers/readers
3. Introduce new vocabulary

CONCLUSION
A very common modification of speech is what has been called as convergence. This term refers to the processes whereby two or more individuals alter or shift their speech to resemble that of those they are interacting with. The discussions previously mentioned applying CAT to the classroom worked as motivation to the students since they realized the relevance of accommodation skills. A delicate balance of convergence - divergence with convergence slightly dominant, particularly from the start to develop good rapport was applied. While applying CAT is often time and energy consuming, using contrastive work, teachers were able to guide their students to find a way to use convergence strategies in the L2 since they will become aware that in their own language they do that. They just need to transfer their accommodation skills to the English language. Students view converging teachers as favourable. Accommodating students’ styles leads to student reciprocating. However, to some extent, the students regard diverging teachers as appreciative. There will always be external factors to complicate the dynamics of a classroom. But at least, the application on CAT which is used by the teachers assist their students to face the different ranges of situations in using spoken language, thus enhancing students’ willingness and awareness to perform more maximally.

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