Teaching strategies – 8 Interactive style: Supporting Dinka background speakers from southern Sudan

AMEP RESEARCH CENTRE

August 2007

Context

The Dinka have been arriving in increasing numbers as refugees from the civil war in southern Sudan and the program of 'Arabisation' and 'Islamicisation' by the Islamic government. These immigrants are mostly Christian or follow tribal religions, and comprise as many as twenty-five related tribal groups. Before their arrival in Australia, many spent long periods in camps where conditions were often very difficult. For further information on the Dinka and other refugee groups from Sudan refer to AMEP Fact sheet – Country profile 4: *Sudan* (Williams 2003).

In common with English language learners from many other cultures, Dinka learners use interactive styles that often differ from those with which native speakers of Australian English are familiar. As a result, their intention can be misunderstood and they can be viewed as aggressive or rude. It is therefore important that learners are not only taught English, but also the interactive styles of native speakers of Australian English.

What is interactive style?

The term 'interactive style' can cover a range of features that make up the way we interact with others, including:

- how we understand the situation we are in

- how we approach people who are more powerful than we are

- what our rights and obligations are in the situation

- how we should conduct a particular conversation, such as:
  - the words we choose
  - how long we should wait before we take our turn to speak
  - how insistent we should be
  - how informal we should be
  - how much to soften what we say
  - how directly we express our feelings, and so on.

Although these details can seem trivial, taken together they form part of the way we talk – that is, our interactive style – and can have a very important impact on how we are perceived by others.

We all have an interactive style (or several), which we usually develop as we are growing up and learning to communicate in our community, and as we learn to communicate in different situations, our repertoire of styles increases. Of course, even though people have grown up in the same place, their styles will be slightly different because human beings are different. Nevertheless, speakers in the same community tend to tacitly agree on what kind of behaviour is appropriate in a certain situation, and to notice if someone is not following the 'rules' of what is thought to be appropriate.

However, this does not mean that we are always conscious of what those rules are. In fact, because we are not normally conscious of these rules, we tend to blame the person rather than their interactive style when we think they are speaking in an inappropriate way. This is particularly so if they sound more direct or insistent than we are used to, and we may become uncomfortable, irritated or angry.

This can be a very serious issue even for speakers from an English-speaking background if they are from another culture because the 'rules' and 'customs' are invisible – we tend to assume that the values and features of the interactive style we grew up with are universal and simply 'right', and therefore have difficulty accepting another way of speaking. For

example, in Australia we often insist that our children say 'please' and 'thank you', and believe that not to do so is impolite. However, this is not the case in all situations or in all cultures. In fact, in some cultures, to say please or thank you in certain situations is seen as, at best, irritating and in some cases insulting, because it implies that the person would not do whatever was requested of them unless asked in this polite way, and therefore calls into question their willingness to do a perfectly ordinary service. (See Yates, 2004 for a brief overview of some of these issues). The dangers of being misunderstood are even greater for adults from other language backgrounds who are learners of English settling in an English-speaking environment.

Issues

Adults who come from another culture and who are not yet fully proficient in English face a double whammy. Not only must they communicate in an unfamiliar language, but they must also communicate in unfamiliar interactive styles.

Adults who have grown up in a different culture have developed assumptions about interaction and how to interact that may be different from those that are widely held in Australia. However, because of the invisible nature of these assumptions, neither they, nor the people they speak to, will find this mismatch easy to recognise.

Because they do not have complete control over various aspects of English – for example, grammar and vocabulary – they are not always aware of the different ways of modulating what they say in English or the nuances of meaning involved in the choice of different words and so on. They may not know what devices are used by native speakers to achieve a particular effect, or if they do, they may have trouble understanding or manipulating them.

This means that misunderstandings may arise in interactions with native speakers of Australian English who may misinterpret the way the learner is speaking in English. Paradoxically, this danger is more acute the more proficient a learner is. When learners have very little English, communicative difficulties are immediately recognisable as a result of limited proficiency, but the better able learners are to express themselves, the more will be expected of them and the less obvious will be their lack of familiarity with the conventions of interaction in Australia. The danger is that they will simply be seen as 'rude' or 'aggressive' or 'insistent' rather than unfamiliar with the appropriate interactive style.

It is important, therefore, to determine what kinds of features of interactive style might cause problems for learners and what teachers can do to help. To

address this issue, a research study was conducted to compare native speakers of Australian English (ENS) with Dinka background learners (DBS) of English at Certificate III level. Subjects were studied performing the same request tasks, both of which required some negotiation. At the conclusion of this study recommendations were formulated about what interactive features teachers can focus on to help their learners understand common Australian interactive styles.

The research project

Since the Dinka are a fairly new group to arrive in Australia, and because they have been perceived as quite direct and insistent in their interactions, the study was designed to compare how they approached the negotiation of requests and compare this to the way native speakers might make the same request. The following tasks - which are related to Module E Intermediate Negotiation and involve a workplace-related request in which some negotiation is necessary – were chosen:

Task 1: An employee asks to take leave at a difficult time. An AMEP teacher played their boss.

Task 2: A Centrelink client requests a change in appointment time with a receptionist (played by an AMEP teacher).

Thirty Dinka and thirty ENS were audio recorded, and each dialogue was transcribed and then analysed for different features of interactive style.

Two major areas of interactive style were investigated:

- sociocultural understandings of the situation and how it should be approached

- use of language to negotiate and soften requests.

In reality, of course, these two aspects of interactive style are closely related and overlap. We tend to choose to use particular words in a particular way *because* we regard our interlocutor in a particular way (that is, our sociocultural understanding of the situation). Thus, for example, we may choose to be indirect because we regard our interlocutor as more powerful than us, and so on.

Findings
Use of words to soften requests
We found some differences between the way in which the native speakers of Australian English (ENS) and the Dinka background speakers of English (DBS) approached and softened their requests, and these may help to explain why they (and, potentially, other learners as well) may sometimes sound insistent. These differences are highlighted in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: ENS were less direct and used grammatical modifications to soften the impact of their requests

ENS	DBS
Used more indirect, question-type forms, such as: '*Can I*' or '*Any possibility of*'	Used direct requests more often.
Often used the *past*, *modal* and *continuous* to soften their requests by adding distance: '*I'd like to* talk to you about my annual leave.' '*I was hoping* we could …'	Rarely changed the grammatical form of the verb in their requests to soften its force.
Often embedded their requests in a polite frame using the continuous form: 'So, *I was just wondering if you* can …' 'I *was just wondering if I* could …'	Used these less often and less accurately.

Table 2: ENS added more softening words to mitigate the impact of what they were saying, and made word choices that softened the impact of their request

ENS	DBS
Often added softening words such as hedges or 'just': '*Maybe* I could take the days that I haven't had yet.' 'I *just* need these three weeks to finish that.'	Used these much less often
Often made vocabulary choices which softened or understated the impact of what they were saying: 'I really would *appreciate* being able to …'	Did this less often, so that their requests sometimes sounded rather bald: 'I *want* to take a leave now.' 'I *would like to* change this time.'

To summarise, in contrast to the native speakers, the Dinka background speakers:

- were more direct

- did not soften their requests using:
  - grammar
  - softening words
  - words which understate the request.

These features of their interactive style may contribute to an impression of directness and abruptness.

Use of empathetic markers

ENS used a range of ways to show empathy and connection, as shown in Tables 3, 4 and 5. This helped to signal that they understood the consequences of their requests and took joint responsibility to help with these.

To summarise, in contrast to the native speakers, the Dinka background speakers:

- used fewer disarmers

- signalled empathy less often

- used fewer interpersonal markers that did not really signal connection

- used fewer disarmers to anticipate and address interlocutor concerns

- used and repeated more reasons for their request.

When asked what she would do if her request had not been granted, one Dinka background speaker said that she would have simply kept going to convince us.

These features of their interactive style may contribute to an impression that speakers are insistent but do not take responsibility for their actions or negotiate a solution.

Some factors that may have affected DBS speakers responses

Many of the Dinka background speakers in the study had never had regular paid employment and did not fully understand the rights and obligations that they had in the workplace-related negotiations in which they were recorded. They were unfamiliar with concepts such as paid annual leave, and some had to ask what you could use it for. Others showed that they had a different appreciation of the rights and obligations of employees and their employers. These may be very important in understanding what could be

Table 3: ENS used a range of ways to show empathy and connection

ENS	DBS
'empathetic markers' (verbs like I think / know / realise / feel)	
Often used these to show their understanding of the issues facing their interlocutors: 'I *realise* how hard it is.' 'I *know* that it's not a lot of … ahm … ahhh … notice…' 'I *understand* I really do.'	Did not use these as often, and when they did they tended to signal only awareness of the problems created by the request, rather than showing that they empathised. 'You know, I *know*, *I know* we are so busy now, *I know*.'
interpersonal markers showing connection (you know what I mean … you see …)	
Often used: '… it's just like, um, *you know*, like I said …' '… *you know*, I don't mind working … working extra time, *you know* during Christmas and that.'	Used half as many, and those they used often signalled shared knowledge, rather than an empathetic connection between the speakers: '… as *you know* you are my manager,' '… umm … *you know* I am going to finish at two o'clock.'
consultative devices (such as 'would that be okay with you?')	
Used these often to check a course of action with their interlocutors or suggest a solution: 'Okay *is there any way I could* make that later in the day.' '*How about if I tried to* organise something with one of the staff members.'	Used them more often to pass the final responsibility for the solution to the problem off to their interlocutor: '*Could you mind to* arrange for me.' '*What would you* advise me to do?' '*May you grant* me if possible.'

Table 4: ENS prepared requests carefully and 'disarmed' objections

ENS	DBS
Tended to prepare for the request carefully, with an apology or a request to 'talk': *I was … ah … just ah wondering if I could talk to you a little bit* about annual leave.	Used these less often
Identified the potential problems that their interlocutors might have in complying with their request and 'disarmed' these, sometimes with offers of help: '*I know that it's ah a pretty busy time at the moment …*' '*I'm willing to come in tomorrow morning*, either early or late in the afternoon if you like.'	Did this much less frequently. Sometimes avoided making the request at all so that their interlocutors had to make it explicit and then work out a solution to any problems created: 'Yeah, OK, so Hassad what are you saying?' 'You want to take some leave now, do you?' 'You want to take your leave?'

Table 5: ENS avoided simple repetition of reasons for their request

ENS	DBS
Tended to develop the reasons behind the request slowly over several turns so that the interlocutor did not feel too pressured: ENS: … as you know, um, my house went up for sale … Inter: Yeah that's right, yeah. ENS: and the settlements actually in a … um … week's time '… I have to move … um … and the thing is I'm moving out of the house cause I've sold my house and settlement day I've …'	Used more reasons which were often repeated rather than reformulated and so sometimes sounded a little insistent: '… Yes. So I want to … I want to … to … to … change the time because I … at that time tomorrow I got a … doctor appointment, doctor's appointment with doctor.' '… My doctor, so if you … if is possible I want to change, uhh …' '… Is difficult … uh … because I have the same … the same time I have a doctor appointment.'

perceived as inappropriate insistence. One woman told us, for example, that:

> In Sudan if you give a reason such as you need to go and help your community, do something for your family, it is a very strong reason and the manager would be looked down upon if they refused. Work is not seen as being more important than doing something for your family or community … If, for example, you said your mother is in hospital, your manager [is] likely to offer to go and visit with you.

Strategies

The differences that were found in the way the two groups approached and negotiated requests suggest some priorities for teaching both the linguistic and sociocultural aspects of interactive style.

However, as teachers we need also to remember that even within one culture, individuals vary enormously in their interactive style, and just because learners come from a particular background, does not mean that they will necessarily speak in the same way.

We suggest that focusing on the following language devices and cultural practices will help learners from different cultures understand and more closely match Australian English interactive styles.

However, it is also important to bear in mind that it takes two to tango! Successful communication depends on both parties.

Request forms

These include teaching and practice of:

- Request forms such as
  - can I …
  - so, can we
  - is it possible to
  - is it possible for me to.

- grammar to soften requests, such as the past, continuous and embedding:
  - if you could
  - I was hoping we could
  - I was just wondering if I could.

Although the grammar can be challenging for a beginner, phrases could be learned as a formula.

Words that soften

Adding a softening word or phrase, such as different kinds of hedges and the under-stater 'just', can soften the impact of a request:

- I ahm *I'm kind of* hoping that

- But um *sort of as* you know my house was for sale

- Is it possible to ah *maybe* juggle the time *perhaps*?

- So I'm *just* wondering if we can change it to 2 o'clock the day after?

Phrases that prepare for a request

The impact of a request is softened by leading up to it with 'let's talk' routines and apologies:

- I *just … ahm … sorry to disturb you* I *just* wanted to ask you about my leave.

Markers that show empathy

These include markers such as:

- You know

- You see.

Ways to show anticipation of any objections to the request

In Australian English culture, the person making the request may anticipate objections and address them up-front through the use of:

disarmer formulae such as

- I know/realise

- look (name) *I know* this is a bit sudden but …

and offers such as

- I could do most of it before I leave.

- I could come early tomorrow.

It is particularly important to focus on stress and intonation here.

Alternatives to the use of repeated reasons as a strategy for persuasion

Explicitly discuss the notion of 'negotiation' and how Australians tend to do it. In this context you can raise awareness of and practise features such as:

- suggesting a compromise

- reformulating or developing a reason rather than repeating it

- leaving the interlocutor the 'space' to think.

Knowledge of the culture of the workplace

In addition, newly-arrived migrants with little experience of the workplace would benefit from sessions which help them to become more familiar with:

- information on workplace conditions, rights and responsibilities in Australia

- employer and employee expectations

- workplace communications.

It would also be useful for employers to be aware of the different expectations of the workplace, workplace relations and the importance of family/community affairs that migrants from Dinka and many other backgrounds might bring with them.

Annotated bibliography

Deng, F. M. (1998). The cow and the thing called "what": Dinka cultural perspectives on wealth and poverty. J*ournal of International Affairs*, 52(1), 101. Retrieved June 26, 2007, from:
Expanded Academic ASAP via Thomson Gale: http://0 find.galegroup.com.alpha2.latrobe.edu.au:80/itx/info-mark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=EAIM&docId=A54117761&source=gale&userGroupName=latrobe&version=1.0.[ID1]

Although now a little old, this article is a readable account of the traditional values of the Dinka (attempts to obtain more contemporary accounts have been hampered by the hostilities). Written by an erstwhile ambassador to the US and Minister of State for Foreign Affairs with an ancestral as well as an academic interest in the topic, it outlines aspects of Dinka culture and gives a brief summary of how the civil war impacted on this culture in recent years.

Williams, A. (2003). AMEP Fact sheet – Country profile 4: *Sudan*. Sydney: AMEP Research Centre. Professional development resource downloadable from: http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/pdamep/factsheets

This paper gives a wealth of information relevant to the Dinka and other refugee groups from Sudan, including demographic, economic, geographical and historical information.

Yates. L. (2004). The 'secret rules of language': Tackling pragmatics in the classroom. *Prospect*, (19)1, 3–21.

This article gives a short overview of the kinds of issues that are involved in interactive style and the difficulties that they present for adults learning to communicate in a new culture. It offers a brief review of some relevant literature on this aspect of cross-cultural communication from studies involving learners. An approach to teaching about such issues is included.

Yates, L. (Ed.) (in press). *The not-so generic skills: Teaching employability communication skills to adult migrants*. Sydney: NCELTR.

This book looks at issues of cross-cultural differences in interactive style from the perspective of generic employability skills as they are conceptualised within the framework used in adult education in a wide range of industries in Australia. It argues that adults from other language and cultural backgrounds need special attention to matters of interactive style if they are to be assisted into the workplace. Four sample units of work are included that can be used to address these issues with learners at Certificate III level.

Web-based resources which offer background on the Dinka, Sudan and Sudanese refugees

The Dinka of the southern Sudan visited 12/02/07.
http://www.ptc.nsw.edu.au/scansw/dinka.htm

This site gives a short, accessible summary of the traditional lifestyle and customs of the Dinka and also links to a photo gallery.

Sudan visited 12/02/07.
http://atheism.about.com/library/FAQs/islam/countries/bl_SudanChristianity.htm

This site is focused around Sudanese religion including information on Christianity, Islam, regionalism and ethnicity, and status of women.

Crimes of War Project Online magazine visited 12/02/07.
http://www.crimesofwar.org/sudan-mag/sudan1.html

This is a not for profit organisation set up in 1999 by journalists, lawyers and scholars to provide a forum for debate and raise public awareness about global conflicts, and international humanitarian law's role in resolving these conflicts. The April 2002 edition, Sudan: Africa's Endless War? focuses on Southern Sudan and includes a photo essay.

Sudan Profile visited 12/02/07.
http://www.cal.org/co/publications/cultures/sudan.html

Published in downloadable format by the US-based Cultural Orientation Resource Center (http://www.cal.org/), this profile includes demographic and lifestyle information, and a discussion of the internal conflict and resettlement issues for Sudanese refugees. Also contains some further relevant references and websites.

Sudan to Canada – A Cultural Profile
http://www.cp-pc.ca/english/sudan/

Similar to the last site, a Canadian website providing cultural and demographic information as a background to issues that may arise for newly arrived Sudanese in Canada.

Library of Congress Country Studies – Sudan
http://memory.loc.gov/frd/cs/sdtoc.html

Older (1992) but extensive study covering Sudanese history (from the coming of Islam in the 7th century to the present-day), demographics; language and ethnic groups, politics and government; judiciary; role of military and paramilitary groups. Includes a large bibliography.

Sudanese On-line Research Association (SORA)
http://sora.akm.net.au/

This is the website of the Sudanese On-line Research Association (SORA) and provides an access point for Sudan-related research. SORA has the aim of raising awareness in academic and wider circles of the

Sudanese diaspora living outside Sudan and the situation of the Sudanese. The site brings together reports of their lives, journeys and stories, and links to the Sudan Resources Centre of Australia and is useful in the search for material on refugees from this region and issues around their settlement in Australia.

SAIL, the Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning Program
http://home.vicnet.net.au/~sail/index.htm

This is the website of SAIL, the Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning Program, a volunteer, non-profit, secular organisation that provides free English support and community services to the Sudanese refugee community in Melbourne. This is a good source of information on Sudanese refugees in general and offers some downloadable background resources.

Compiled by Lynda Yates
Senior researcher
AMEP Research Centre
La Trobe University
Culture and African learners 2005/2007