Intercultural postgraduate supervision meetings: An exploratory discourse study

Abstract

Face-to-face meetings are a vital part of the postgraduate supervision process in universities, and one which students studying in a second language medium may find daunting. Teachers of English for Academic Purposes, working to help international postgraduate students acculturate successfully to a particular English-speaking university department, have been hampered by a lack of information on the discourse practices of these meetings. This paper reports findings from an analysis of transcripts of meetings between two student/supervisor pairs in agricultural science. The supervisors were native English speakers and students were international postgraduates and second-language speakers of English. The analysis suggests that these students did not take up turns at talk without very clear signals to do so, and did not act to repair misunderstandings that went beyond the surface propositional level. It is suggested that examples of authentic interaction such as these could usefully be included in language-based training programs to enhance the success of intercultural supervision and other types of transactions for students, supervisors, and other interlocutors.

Introduction

Face-to-face meetings are a crucial component of many supervisory situations, including postgraduate research supervision in universities. In this context, it is recognised that they are private and thus ‘fraught with danger of misunderstanding’ (Moses 1984: 163). When students and supervisors have different language and cultural backgrounds, the possibility increases of both mismatches in expectations and misunderstandings in face-to-face communication (Ballard and Clanchy 1991). Although international students enrolling in postgraduate research degree programs in English-speaking countries will generally (but not always; see Meldrum 1996: 24) have achieved the university’s prerequisite score on a recognised English language test, they will often have received little specific preparation for the face-to-face spoken interaction aspect of their study program. Nevertheless, discussion
with their supervisor about possible topics begins almost immediately after
the students’ arrival at the university. Similar situations arise in other super-
visory relationships, and TESOL teachers may be called on to prepare their
students for such interactions.

Guidance in the literature focuses on generic recipes, recommending
for example that international students should aim to demonstrate initiative
and independence to meet the expectations of ‘Western’ supervisors (Ballard
and Clanchy 1988). However, little research has investigated how these
behaviours might be demonstrated in face-to-face interaction. In a study
of course advising sessions at a U.S. university, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford
(1990: 496) found that students who pay too much attention to establishing
compliance ‘miss the opportunity to establish themselves as having initiative’.
Thomas (1983) introduced the concept of pragmatic failure, which she
defined as encompassing situations where an utterance fails to achieve a
speaker’s goal, or a hearer is unable to understand what is meant by what
is said. Thomas distinguished pragmalinguistic failure, caused by mistaken
beliefs about the pragmatic force of an utterance, and sociopragmatic failure,
caused by different beliefs about rights or ‘mentionables’. In this latter area,
advanced learners of English may make inappropriate assumptions about
the respective rights and roles of themselves and their interlocutors. Thus,
for example, international postgraduates can encounter difficulties if their
beliefs about the status of supervisors lead to more deferential behaviour in
their new study context than would normally be expected.

As a language and learning lecturer working with international post-
graduate students and their supervisors on a regular basis, I undertook a
qualitative pilot study of spoken interaction in two meetings between each
of two student/supervisor pairs in the area of agricultural science. The
supervisors were both native speakers of English and the students were inter-
national postgraduate students who spoke English as a second or other
language. The aim of the study was to analyse the communication as it
unfolded turn by turn, in order to identify features which appeared to hinder
clear communication and warranted further investigation. This paper
concentrates on the interaction from the perspective of the students. The
implications for supervisors and cross-cultural supervision training have
been reported elsewhere (Cargill 1998a; 1998b).

Data collection

Each of the two student/supervisor pairs tape-recorded two sequential
meetings arranged to discuss the students’ research. Post-meeting comment
sheets were completed privately by each participant. The audiotaped data
were transcribed sequentially using the conventions of Brown and Yule
(1983), which are summarised in the Appendix.

To maintain anonymity, the names of the students are rendered as X
and Y. Wherever particular words may identify participants, the category
has been substituted for the name and placed in parentheses, for example, ‘Briefly, we misunderstood each other on the point of the (disease organism) populations tested’. The transcript extracts are identified by the pair number (P1 or P2) and a minute and second reference to the original tape.

**Subject background details**

These are summarised in Table 1. Both students had reached the University’s prerequisite score of 6.0 on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test before enrolment. Both student/supervisor pairs had also previously participated in a compulsory, discipline-specific, one-semester Integrated Bridging Program (IBP) for international postgraduate students (Cargill 1996; McGowan, Seton and Cargill 1996). A particular focus of the IBP is face-to-face interaction with supervisors. The students discuss the literature on expectations of Australian supervisors and techniques for breaking politely into the flow of the talk to check comprehension and repair problems. Appropriate language forms are practised in class, and the curriculum structure of the IBP requires that students then negotiate particular research-related issues with their supervisors. The present study took place two semesters after the students’ IBP.

**Table 1: Background information on participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Pair 1</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Pair 2</th>
<th></th>
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<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
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<td>40–45</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>35–40</td>
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<td>Indonesian</td>
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**Results and discussion**

This section focuses on transcript extracts grouped under themes which emerged as salient during the analysis: students’ take-up of offered turns at talk, and addressing miscommunication that went beyond the propositional meaning of the exchange.

**Taking up offered turns**

It is noticeable in the transcripts of all four meetings that the students seem reluctant to take up turns at talk. For example in Extract 1, there is a six-second pause after a minimum feedback token ‘OK’ by the student in line 5, and pauses of two and 1.5 seconds in the supervisor’s turn in lines 13–14. All of these are longer than the one-second pause which is the expected norm.
in Australian English (O'Grady and Millen 1994). These pauses combine with lexical cues, including the ‘and so’ in line 1 and the ‘yeah so’ in line 6, to suggest that the supervisor had come to the end of a topic and was offering the student the opportunity to initiate a new one. Yet it is not until the supervisor asks explicitly in line 14 that the student comes in with his new topic. It seems possible that a supervisor could interpret such non-take up of turns at long pauses as demonstrating that the student has nothing to say, particularly if this behaviour occurs regularly.

Extract 1 (P2, mtg 2, 20.37)

1 Su and so once the crossing’s finished + and we’ve got a bit more
2 time again\
3 St yeah + [?]  
4 Su let’s try it again/
5 St OK (6 secs)
6 Su yeah so ++ that should be fine \/+ I think ++ I don’t
7 know what the problem was last time + but + hopefully we can I overcome it
8 St | laughter
9 Su /+++ get things to work \\+++  
10 St yeah ++
11 Su [???]
12 St yeah ++ yeah maybe next time however we’ll + succeed
13 Su yeah +++ shou + it SHOULD work + I don’t know why not /
14 (2 secs) yeah (1.5 secs) YEAH + is there anything else /+++  
15 St ah + yes ++ ah=
16 Su =just at the moment
17 St ah + about the + enrolment/

However, this kind of apparent reticence and taciturnity is associated with deference in many societies (Scollon and Scollon 1983). In societies influenced by Confucian thought, for example, ‘the teacher always is the person who introduces topics’ (Scollon and Wong-Scollon 1991: 123). Thus a behaviour which may be motivated by the student’s desire to appear respectful could be interpreted in a sharply negative way which could have ongoing detrimental effects on a student/supervisor relationship in the long run. This fits within Banks, Ge and Baker’s (1991: 105) definition of miscommunication as ‘something gone awry communicatively that has social consequences for the interactants’. They define social consequences as misattribution of motive, unwarranted actions, changes in patterns of interaction, and similar responses to encounters that may debilitate relationships; thus miscommunication for them is not likely to be something that is repaired in the current interaction. In the case of pause length, the effect may not even be noticed at a conscious level and is thus very unlikely to be repaired.
A further example can be seen in Extract 2, with long pauses occurring after a suggestion made by the supervisor (lines 6 and 7). Here the student introduced a new topic only after a very long pause of 18 seconds had made it abundantly clear that the supervisor had no more to say. When the supervisor's turn is a suggestion, as here, there is a possibility that non-take up of a turn, especially coupled with introduction of a completely new topic, could be seen as either incomprehension or unwillingness to do what has been suggested. If respectful reticence is at the base of the behaviour, both of these would be incorrect inferences.

**Extract 2 (P2, mtg 1, 9.31)**

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1  Su  there are always papers being published in ‘Theoretical and
2     Applied Genetics’ /+ in every issue they’ll have one or two
3     papers \+ relating to genetic diversity / and molecular markers /
4     ++ it’d be good to have a look at some of those \++ give you an
5     idea of what we’re ++ trying to achieve \+ and also it’d give
6     you an idea of + alternative methods of + analysing the data \ (18 secs)
7  St  (clears throat) (7 secs) um ++ um ++ what about + ah ++
8     the F2s \ 
9  Su  the F2s \ 
10 St  yeah + you you said that ++ you have + ah
11 Su  (coughs) yes \ we’ve got some F2s that we’re testing this year /
12   ++ and one of them has + (cultivar name) as a parent /+
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**Addressing miscommunication beyond the propositional level**

Propositional content seemed to be negotiated successfully throughout the interactions in this study. However, where meaning had to be inferred, communication sometimes became more problematic. Extract 3 follows a discussion of the possible effects of the fact that the student had to replant one type of seed because of poor germination, resulting in the two types of seed under comparison not reaching maturity at the same time. In line 4, the supervisor explicitly asks for comment after a three-second pause has not been taken up, and the student's response in lines 5 to 7 is characterised by nervous laughter, downgraders and rephrasing, and a segment too quietly spoken to be understood for transcription. The second part of the response is very spaced, with frequent fillers and pauses. In line 19 it is clear that the supervisor has interpreted this response to mean that the student is not really satisfied with the outcome of their discussion on this point. She then seeks suggestions of other ways the situation could be tackled. This extract leads into a long discussion (data not shown) in which the student does not suggest an alternative but instead talks about the final result he hopes to obtain for the experiment.
This chain of events suggests a reluctance on the student’s part to respond to the supervisor’s invitation to talk about alternatives. Three possible reasons for such reluctance could be that he did have reservations but that they did not involve having ideas about alternative solutions, that he did not have reservations, or that he did not know the meaning of the word ‘reservations’ in this context. Does this then mean that the supervisor misinterpreted his intended message in the hesitant utterances of lines 5–13 of Extract 3? Hatch (1992) suggests that the use of self-deprecating laughter and disfluencies can help to portray speakers as modest, and this may have been the intention of these lines. What can be stated is that the student did not move to query the supervisor’s statement about reservations.

However, the student would have needed to break into the conversational flow in a fairly abrupt manner to question or correct the supervisor’s interpretation, because she presents it as a given — ‘you obviously have reservations about it’ (line 19) — and follows this up with a question. A response which sought to correct the supervisor’s interpretation would be dispreferred, in Conversation Analysis terms, as the preferred response to a question is an answer. After seeking some clarification, the student attempts to provide the expected ‘answer’ in response, but with little
success in the longer term, as discussed above. If the supervisor had used an open query about whether the student had reservations, rather than acting on her assumption that she had fully comprehended his meaning, he may have found it easier to comment on the accuracy of the interpretation itself, as well as to seek clarification of the rather particular meaning of the word ‘reservations’ in this context. It seems that the supervisor’s use of a solidarity politeness strategy, indicating speaker knows hearer’s wants and is taking them into account (Brown and Levinson 1987), may have made an appropriate response from the student more difficult.

It should also be noted here that Student 1 shows far fewer surface errors in his spoken English than Student 2, and thus his foreign-ness is less likely to be at the forefront of an interlocutor’s attention. It may, therefore, be less likely that his contributions to the conversation will be interpreted as being influenced by cultural values and norms other than those commonly operating in Australian academic circles. Platt (1989: 16) notes this recognition is an important factor in how native-speaking interlocutors react to the use of communicative strategies based on the rule system of another culture.

Pragmatic meaning also appears to have caused difficulty for Pair 2, as can be seen in Extract 4. Although the supervisor noted no communication problems for the meeting, the student, in his comment sheet, reported that he did not really understand:

about the analysis. Especially to look at the proportion of resistance and susceptibility of plants to (disease organism).

The comment refers to a stretch of talk that lasted over four minutes. This ‘analysis’ is not, however, something that the student was required to undertake immediately; understanding it would have provided the rationale for including extra plant families in the upcoming experiment, which the supervisor was recommending.

The extract includes a significant number of pauses where clarification requests could have been made but were not, and some minimal feedback tokens (back-channelling) by the student. Interestingly, Aronsson and Sätterlund-Larsson (1987: 22) reported in a doctor/patient interview study that ‘minimal feedback tokens are ambiguous in that they may [...] signify either attention or agreement’. In the absence of signals that the student did not understand particular parts of the explanation, his retrospective comment may refer to the overall concepts underlying the analysis procedure, and thus to a more global aspect of the communication, or even background knowledge. Admitting to a lack of understanding here may have been too threatening to the student’s face, or the student may have seen it as possibly threatening to the supervisor’s face, in the sense of implying criticism of the explanation. Even in a colloquium context, Tracy and Carjuzaa (1993: 185) wondered if they were observing students ‘working to please or avoid displeasing those who exercised fate control over them’.
When the student does take up an opportunity, provided by a four-second pause, to confirm his own comprehension in line 37, he does not focus on what he did not understand (the analysis) but on the practical outcome of what the supervisor has been telling him — what he has to do differently in his upcoming experiment. Thus the student has not sought to repair his lack of understanding in the current interaction, although there appear to have been opportunities where he could have done so.

**Implications for teaching**

In order to help my students and their supervisors see the communicative dilemma represented by situations such as these, and to adopt a position in response to it, I am currently using transcript extracts such as those presented in this paper in two kinds of workshop situations. The study participants have all been enthusiastic that the material should be used in this way. Firstly, the extracts are used in workshops for postgraduate supervisors, both novice supervisors in a university-wide training program, and supervisors embarking on a new cross-cultural supervision relationship as part of the IBP each semester (Cargill 1998a). In the student
IBP classes, I have found that the extracts provide a helpful way to unpack issues surrounding how independence and initiative can be portrayed and perceived. I display and read aloud the selected extract (using the original tapes would risk breaking confidentiality, especially for staff members) and ask students to discuss in pairs what they think may have been the communicative intention of the student. I then ask what they think may have been the supervisor’s interpretation, as suggested by what s/he said next. The extracts can thus allow new students to observe in a concrete way very deferential verbal behaviour and its possible interpretations by supervisors. This process can open up discussion of possible alternative strategies students could consider adopting in their own meetings. My aim is not to suggest that all misunderstanding can be avoided, but to increase the chances that students (and supervisors) will be aware of possible sources of misunderstanding related to the need to infer meaning, and willing to discuss how they are communicating as well as the substance of the information being communicated.

**Conclusion**

To summarise, the two international postgraduate research students in this study seemed reluctant to take up turns at talk with their supervisors unless given very clear signals that they were expected to do so. They also did not intervene in the flow of the talk to address issues of miscommunication or non-understanding that went beyond the immediate propositional level. Significantly, as previously pointed out, these behaviours were observed after the students had participated in the University’s well-regarded semester-long Integrated Bridging Program (IBP) (Cargill 1996), which includes explicit teaching about Australian supervisors’ expectations that postgraduate students will exhibit initiative and independence and should not be unduly deferential. Thus it seems that participation in the IBP had had little influence on the interactional strategies these particular students adopted in the instances of face-to-face communication investigated here. The results suggest that an important factor here is Thomas’ (1983) sociopragmatic failure: different beliefs between cultures about rights and ‘mentionables’. In this case, the problematic area concerns the appropriate roles for a supervisor and a postgraduate student. There appears to be a conflict between taking steps to communicate clearly and remaining within the model of student role the students see as appropriate for them.

It is clearly inappropriate to generalise from this small study, but the results suggest that it would be worthwhile to conduct further research on intercultural postgraduate supervision meetings using a similar approach. Differences in academic discipline area and student language proficiency, as well as in the combinations of language and cultural backgrounds and genders of the participants (including where both are native speakers of English) are likely to be important. The results of such extended work could
contribute to knowledge about how supervision roles are worked out by the participants in their spoken interaction. Although this study has concentrated specifically on the student-supervisor dyad, clearly similar issues arise in a range of other situations in which non-native speakers interact with native speakers. Insights from similar analyses of different kinds of interactions could provide a useful basis for language instruction programs preparing learners of English for a wide variety of other professional and personal contexts.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

short pauses (tone group or breath divisions) are indicated by +
longer pauses (less than one second) ++
overlappings \\
unclear parts [ ? ]
rising tone on tone group /
falling tone on tone group \
rise / fall / \ 
fall / rise \ /
CAPS prominent syllable

References


Cargill, M 1998a. ‘Crosscultural postgraduate supervision meetings: clues for improving practice from an analysis of transcripts’. In *Advancing International


