FOREIGN LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE AND LEARNERS' INTUITIONS ABOUT VERBAL INTERACTION[1]

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1. INTRODUCTION

Foreign language performance has been traditionally assessed from the point of view of the subject's capacity to manipulate the linguistic code in a way as similar as possible to native speakers of the language. This may be the result of the fact that foreign language tests are in themselves an exercise of decontextualization, where the learner is not placed in the actual circumstance of use but rather forced to imagine it. Because of the gap existing between "imagined performance" and "actual performance", the examiner is often faced with no other choice but to restrict his/her assessment to the structural component of communication, leaving aside all the other factors that contribute to the success or failure of a communicative event.

One of the aspects where the gap between "imagined performance" and "actual performance" becomes most obvious is the assessment of oral abilities, which in some international standardized tests consists of an interview between examiner and examinee. The test in this case takes the form of a specific speech event involving two participants, one with the status of expert and another with the status of non-expert, each with his/her own expectations about what is appropriate behaviour in that context. Furthermore, this speech event is expected to develop according to the cultural norms of the expert participant. Since the assessment is done from a holistic point of view at the end of the interview it seems logical to think that what is at stake is not only the structural characteristics of the subject's output but also his/her enactment of the role that he/she has been assigned in the interview. It is at this point where the examinee's definition of the encounter as well as his/her notion of the role that language plays in it becomes very crucial.

In spite of the relevance of the oral interview for the final assessment of the learner's abilities to communicate in a foreign language there has been little reflection upon its status in the respective cultures of the examiner and examinee. In the first place, an oral interview is an intercultural encounter which may be approached differently by its participants depending on their cultural assumptions. In the second place, we are dealing with a "gatekeeping" encounter in which one of the participants has been given the authority to make decisions on behalf of institutions that will affect the other participant's possibilities of social, economic and geographical mobility (Erickson 1976). It has been shown (Scollon and Scollon 1981, Gumperz et al. 1979) that the greater the number of culturally-based assumptions shared between gatekeeper and applicant the more positive the outcome of the encounter. The problem in the case of a foreign language oral interview is that explicit teaching of cultural assumptions and how they affect verbal interaction rarely form part of foreign language training, and that in many cases the examinee approaches the interview situation with a set of cultural assumptions different from those of the examiner.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the relationship existing between the oral performance of a subject in a "gatekeeping" encounter such as an office appointment with a teacher and his/her definition of the situation and of the role that language plays in it. The experiment proposed touches upon two very important areas of linguistic research which have been little studied from the point of view of foreign language training. The first one is the ethnography of speaking, with its interest in studying situated oral performance, what is accomplished through it and how it relates to the speakers' assumptions, knowledge and beliefs about the world (Duranti 1988). The second area of linguistic research involved in the experiment is represented by the psychological and computational approaches to describing discourse understanding by means of structures of knowledge-of-the-world which have been defined as frames, scripts, scenarios or schemata (Brown and Yule 1983).

2. METHOD

The experiment involved 9 Catalan university students majoring in English, which were selected on the basis of the score they obtained in the TOEFL test. This is a test of English as a foreign language which is required of any non-native speaker of English intending to study for a degree in an American university. It consists of three parts: listening comprehension, reading comprehension and structure of English. The maximum score is 677, but most universities consider 550 as an acceptable score to follow a course of studies. All the subjects which took part in the experiment scored between 560 and 590.

The object of this first part of the experiment was to eliminate one potential variable which might affect oral performance: linguistic competence. In this way all the subjects were considered to have the same level of proficiency in manipulating the linguistic code in the decontextualized situation of the test.

Another variable that was eliminated was that of the sex of the subjects. It has been shown (Lakoff 1975) that women and men employ differently the linguistic resources of a language and that, in general, women's discourse shows more features of "powerless" language than that of men (O'Barr and Atkins 1980). It was for this reason that all the subjects selected for the experiment were women.

The second part of the experiment involved a role-play session in which the subjects were asked to visit separately one of their teachers during office hours. This is a task which was found quite realistic and therefore one with which the students would have no problems in defining the appropriate behaviour. The role-play sessions were always conducted with the same male teacher. The students were given the task of asking the teacher to change the date of an examination because for some reason of their choosing they could not sit for it on the previously scheduled day. All the subjects knew the teacher because they were either taking a course with him or they had taken it during the previous academic year. The task was given to them five minutes before the role-play session was to take place. The reason for this was to avoid the possibility of the subjects coming to the session with their role rehearsed and, thereby, disguising a more "natural" performance. They were told that the whole encounter was being recorded and that it would be later transcribed. The average length of each encounter was 5 minutes.

The third and last part consisted of a third session in which the subjects were made to listen to a tape-recording and a transcription of the verbal

interaction in which they had taken part. After this, they went through an ethnographic interview with the analyst which lasted between 15 and 30 minutes. This interview developed around the following questions:

1. What do you think of the conversation?

2. How would you define your relationship with the teacher?

3. In general, how do you feel when you go to visit a teacher during his office hours?

4. What do you think of the fact that teachers have certain office hours to help the students on an individual basis?

5. What is your opinion about the relationship between a teacher and a student?

6. How would you define your attitude and that of your teacher during the verbal interaction?

7. What was your objective during the interview? Did you think you would be able to attain your objective?

8. Do you think that it would have been very different if you had been able to talk in your native language?

9. Do you think the outcome would have been better?

10. Would you have added or taken out something?

Questions 1 to 6 were intended to force the student to reflect upon the social situation and the social roles that were being negotiated in it. Question 6 to 10 required the student to consider the role that language played in that situation as a means of negotiation of both the social/institutional roles of each participant and the specific goal of the encounter.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The analysis of the data is centered around 6 different strategies the subjects adopted in order to carry out the task they were assigned. The concept of "strategy" must be understood here from a functional point of view, i.e. as the speaker's systematic use of linguistic and general socio-cultural knowledge to achieve his/her intended goals in producing a message in a given context (Gumperz 1982).

The analysis will point out in the first place those strategies which are favoured by specific individuals and those which are rejected as effective means to accomplish their objective. In the second place it will be necessary to discover if there is any relationship between the subjects' choice of certain strategies and their response to the ethnographic interview.

The strategies which have been selected as analytical variables are the following:

1. Topic presentation: The object of analysis here is the way in which the subject states the purpose of the verbal encounter. Essentially, what we are after here is whether the issue is presented as a source of conflict or not.

2. Confrontation: In the verbal interaction studied, this strategy can be applied in two different ways: (i) a challenge or disagreement with the teacher's view of the problem, and (ii) a rejection of a suggestion by the teacher which does not conform with the original plans of the student.

3. Acknowledgement of responsiblity: What we need to consider in this case is whether and to what extent the students acknowledge their responsibility in the appearance of a conflict between the teacher and themselves. The student has three different possibilities: (i) an explicit recognition of the problem, (ii) an expression of agreement with the teacher's view on the issue or (iii) a renunciation to pursue her original objective.

4. Conflict solution: The analysis of this variable consists of discovering whether the student finds it appropriate or necessary to propose a solution for the conflict and also whether this proposal is self-initiated or requested by the teacher.

5. Emotive function: This strategy involves, on the one hand, the

expression of emotions or inner states of the student and, on the other hand, the action of appealing to the personal feelings of the teacher on the issue.

6. Justification: The interest of this variable is the degree to which the students deem it necessary to supply a series of details justifying their not being able to sit for the exam on the day it had been originally fixed. It is also interesting to consider whether this is a strategy that the students initate on their own or is triggered by the request of the teacher.

It is necessary to bear in mind that each of these strategies cannot be studied separately for each individual, and that in order to obtain a thorough picture of the subject's verbal performance we must set them in relation to one another. Therefore, the comments about the student's preference for one strategy or another require the analyst to keep an eye constantly on the whole verbal encounter, not only on the rest of the strategies applied but also on the general taciturnity or volubility of the speaker.

For the analysis of the encounter I will concentrate on three aspects of the student's definition of the encounter that appeared in the course of the ethnographic interview: (i) the goal of the encounter, (ii) the relationship student-professor and (iii) the language used.

Attainable/unattainable goal:

The nine students who participated in the experiment can be divided into two groups in terms of their view of the goal as attainable or not. A first group includes the four students who clearly responded that their objective was attainable (S2, S4, S5, S8). The second group involves the two students who clearly described their objective as unattainable (S3, S6). Finally, in a third group we could classify the three students who adopted an ambiguous attitude in their response (S1, S7, S9): one of them stated that she found the objective in itself difficult to achieve but that she thought that the teacher could be convinced and the other two students considered their objective as attainable but expected a conflicting reaction from the teacher.

a) Topic presentation: Of the four students who considered that their objective was attainable, three omitted the preface expression "I have a problem" and went straight to the point by announcing that they would not be able to sit for the examination on the day it had been fixed. There is one exception in this group, a student (S5) who answered that she thought her goal attainable but nevertheless included the preface mentioned above. The explanation for this, after examining the whole of the encounter, is that the same lack of familiarity with the teacher (seen, for example, in the absence of inner feelings or emotions in her speech) is what made the student introduce the topic with a preface indicating caution. The two subjects who responded in the interview that they thought that their objective of making the teacher postpone the examination was unattainable introduced the preface expressions "I have a problem". In the group of students showing an ambiguous attitude towards their goal, two students (S7, S9) introduced the preface and one did not.

In general we can say that the view of the goal as attainable promotes a greater degree of directness in the presentation of the goal at the beginning of the encounter.

b) Confrontation: Of the four students who clearly described their goal as attainable, three of them (S1, S2, S8) challenged the negative response of the teacher in rather direct ways (e.g. "why/why not?"). Furthermore, all of them introduced more than one disagreement. The two students who defined their objective as unattainable confronted the teacher on only one occasion and in both cases they introduced their disagreements preceded by softening devices (e.g. "yes but", "well"). The three students with an ambiguous attitude towards their goal show a slightly stronger tendency to confront the teacher than the latter group: one student (S1) confronted the teacher on only

one occasion but she did it very directly ("why?" [do you need to change the whole exam in order to give me a special examination?]); the other two students (S7, S9) confronted the teacher once and twice respectively and in both cases their disagreements were introduced by means of softening devices.

The conclusion in this case is that confrontation increases in the case of those students who thought that their goal was attainable.

c) Acknowledgement of responsibilty: None of the four students who saw their goal as attainable seems to be clearly giving in in her attempt to convince the teacher accepting the teacher's proposal. One of these students (S5) does not acknowledge her responsibility at any stage in the conversation and another (S8) only acknowledges it once. The high number of acknowledgements of responsibility that we find in the other two students that thought their objective attainable (S2: 4 and S4: 10) can be explained by looking at the nature of the turns in the first case: the student never shows a clear disposition to accept the teacher's negative response to her objective (e.g. "if you say/think so"). In the case of S4, the extremely high number of acknowledgements of responsibility is in itself a clear indication of the lack of "sincerity" with which they were uttered. In fact, the student recognized in the interview that this is a "strategy" that she uses very often and that it produces very good results. Of the two students who defined their goal as unattainable, one (S3) accepted the alternative proposed by the teacher and the other (S6) does not introduce any expression acknowledging her responsibility for the conflict. In the group of students whose view of the goal was ambiguous, two (S1, S9) accepted the alternative proposed by the teacher and the other (S7) expressed her responsibility on two occasions.

In sum, we could say that the students who saw their goal as attainable are much stronger "negotiators." The more intense negotiation is precisely what explains the fact that these students need to introduce more expressions of "acknowledgement of responsibility" in order to save face. The only cases in which the teacher's view is accepted are students who either saw their goal as unattainable (S3) or were ambiguous about it (S1, S9).

d) Conflict solution: The four students who defined their goal as attainable coincided in self-initiating one or more possible solutions for the conflict originated by their inability to attend the examination on a specific day. Neither of the two students who thought that their goal was difficult to fulfill proposed a solution for the conflict. In the third group of students, whose position was ambiguous, one (S1) proposed a solution on three occasions and the other two only once.

In general there is a higher tendency to introduce a solution for the conflict created on the part of those students who saw that their goal was attainable.

Relationship teacher-student:

There were six students who defined their relationship with the teacher as one of familiarity (S2, S4, S6, S7, S8, S9), although three of those (S6, S7, S9) did not acknowledge it fully. The other three students (S1, S3, S5) recognized that there was some social distance between themselves and the teacher.

a) Emotive function: The most noticeable phenomenon in this area is the higher number of utterances invested in the expression of emotive function by those students who defined their relationship with the teacher as one of familiarity (S2: 12, S4: 8, S8: 2) compared with those who pointed out the social distance existing between themselves and the teacher (S1: 0, S3: 1, S5: 0). In between these two opposed poles we find three students (S6, S7, S9) whose familiarity with the teacher is not fully acknowledged, even though

they accept that their relationship with him is closer than with other teachers. These students devote only 1 utterance to expressing emotion.

The conclusion we can reach is that the presence of the emotive function increases if the subjects perceive a short social distance between them.

b) Confrontation: Those subjects who expressed more clearly their familiarity with the teacher confronted him on more than one occasion (S2: 10, S4: 2, S8: 3). However, one of the students who defined her relationship with the teacher as lacking in familiarity (S5) confronted the teacher on five occasions. The other two students who showed themselves as only slightly familiar with the teacher (S1, S3) confronted him only once. Of the three students (S6, S7, S9) who did not fully acknowledge their familiarity with the teacher, only one (S9) confronted him twice.

In general we could say that a close social distance seems to increase the possibilities of confrontation between the teacher and the student.

Language used:

When commenting about the difference using English or Catalan would have made in the students' behaviour during the encounter, three of them (S2, S4, S8) pointed out that their attitude would have been the same if they had been able to express themselves in Catalan. The other 6 students considered that the fact of using the English language as a means of expression was an obstacle for the full expression of their personality.

a) Emotive function: The three students for whom the fact of using English or Catalan did not make a difference (S2, S4, S8) included in their speech more than one utterance referring to their emotions. The presence of this strategy becomes specially relevant in S2 and S4 with 12 and 8 utterances respectively. On the other hand, those students for whom using English was not the same as using Catalan either do not express their emotions at all (S1, S5) or introduce only one utterance related to this meaning (S3, S6, S7, S9).

We can conclude here saying that the lack of comfort in using a language in a specific situation seems to preclude the presence of expressions related to the emotions or inner states of the individual.

b) Confrontation: The highest number of confrontations with the teacher appears in the speech of those students who thought that their attitude would not have changed if they had used Catalan instead of English (S2: 10, S4: 2, S8: 3). The four students who thought that using English was a problem (S1, S3, S6, S7) confronted the teacher only on one occasion and another student (S9) did it on two occasions. It is important to point out that, except in the case of S1, the confrontation from these five students is not as direct as that from the previous group. The exception in this tendency is S5, who, in spite of seeing English as an obstacle to her full expression, confronted the teacher on five occasions.

Again, in this case, we see that confrontation increases with the students' comfort in using the target language.

Taciturnity and volublility:

One indication of the taciturnity or volubility of the students is the number of justification details that they included as part of the self-initiated justification that they gave for their inability to attend the examination. It is interesting to see how those students who supplied more justification details (S1: 7, S2: 6, S4: 13) are the ones who apply the strategies of "acknowledging responsibility" and "self-initiated conflict solution" more frequently.

Furthermore, in the case of S2 and S4 we also find the highest number of utterances with "emotive function." At the other extreme, we have students like S5 and S6 who either didn't apply at all the strategies of "acknowledging responsibility," "self-initiated conflict solution" and "emotive function" or they introduced them only once in their speech.

4. DISCUSSION

The present study has shown that linguistic competence as it is usually assessed in international standarized tests like the TOEFL cannot account for the foreign language learners' variation in oral performance. It has been demonstrated that, independently of their degree of knowledge of the linguistic system, certain aspects of the learners' definition of the encounter can have a powerful impact on the conduct of conversation. The most relevant of these aspects seem to be goal feasibility, social distance and the speakers' reaction towards using the target language instead of their native language.

In order to explore the differences in oral performance I have proposed an approach based not on structural differences in handling the linguistic code but rather a functional approach based on the learners' application of certain strategies geared towards the fulfillment of their goal(s). The strategies I have found relevant for the analysis of this specific encounter are the following: (i) topic presentation, (ii) confrontation, (iii) acknowledgement of responsibility, (iv) conflict solution, (v) emotive function and (vi) justification. It should be pointed out that the kind of strategies deployed are strongly connected with the type of encounter studied as well as the object of negotiation, and that for other types of encounter different strategies may be found analytically relevant.

Through the analysis of their performance during the verbal interaction we have seen that those students who conceived the goal of the encounter as attainable introduce it more directly than those who thought it was less feasible. Also, they confront the teacher on more occasions and are not likely to yield in their attempt to fulfill their goal. The same students show a stronger tendency to propose a solution for the conflict. The existence of a close social distance between the students and the teacher is reflected in an increase in the number of emotive utterances and in the amount of confrontation. Finally, those students who thought that their performance had not been affected by the fact that they were using a foreign language show a tendency to include a higher number of utterances related to their inner feelings and emotions and they are also more likely to confront the teacher.

The deployment of strategies by the different students also shows that, in general, speakers' performance can also be approached from the point of view of what they conceive as the appropriate amount of participation in the verbal interaction. Thus, we can establish a difference between the more interactive or voluble speakers, showing a higher tendency to deploy any of the strategies analyzed, and less interactive or more taciturn speakers, much more reluctant to invest their personality in the interaction by applying any of the strategies studied.

It would also be very interesting to see to what extent the speaker's definition of one aspect of the encounter depends on his/her definition of another. Thus, we have that of the four students who clearly defined their goal as attainable (S2, S4, S5, S8) three also defined their relationship with the teacher as relatively close and, furthermore, these very same students did not think that their interactive behaviour would have changed if they had spoken in their native language.

From the point of view of foreign language performance and assessment, it is necessary to point out that the presence or absence of the strategies studied in the speech of the learners have a direct effect on their presentation of self and, consequently, on the final outcomes of the interaction. In the context of an oral examination the outcome is the examiner's positive or

negative assessment of the examinee's performance as appropriate or not according to his/her definition of what he/she thinks is appropriate verbal behaviour in the culture where the target language is spoken. In a real context of use, the outcome is connected with the speakers' fulfillment of the goal with which they approached the encounter. A fulfillment which, as we all know from personal experience, does not exclusively depend on the nature of the object being negotiated but also on how it is negotiated.

I would suggest that foreign language oral interviews should involve a first part in which the participants, examiner and examinee, clarify their definition of the encounter, either the interview itself or the situation they are asked to role-play. In this way, we would be able to not only avoid potential intercultural or interpersonal misunderstandings, which might have a drastic effect on the final assessment of the learner, but also evaluate the examinee's capacity of adapting to different patterns of behaviour. a

NOTE

This is a translated and revised version of a paper read at the XII Congreso Nacional de AESLA, Barcelona, 20-22 April, 1994.

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APPENDIX 1: EXAMPLES OF THE VERBAL STRATEGIES
DEPLOYED BY ONE OF THE SUBJECTS (S4)

A. Topic presentation
- I came to see you about the exam that we have the tenth
- I'm afraid I can't I won't be able to do the exam

B. Confrontation
- yeah or I'm not gonna see that until September
- yes but I knew the date of my appointment three days ago

C. Acknowledgement of responsibility
- I understand that it's not fair
- of course I understand
- I understand that it's not fair
- if you can't do it I'll understand. I'm just asking
- I realize it's not a common thing to happen
- If not —I'll do it in September

-        I know and I realize that but I'm not doing it on purpose
-        I would be happy to do it the tenth
-        I (h) know (laughs)
-        well just if you can do it tell me

D. Conflict solution
-        could you please change it for me
-        I could do it the day after and I won't have time to call anyone
-        I could do it the day after, the eleventh
-        why don't I do the whole subject in June?
-        if I could do it in June it would be

E. Emotive function
-        could you please change it for me?
-        it would be really:
-        I wouldn't ask anyone
-        I'm just asking
-        but if you could help me
-        if I could do it in June it would be: —( )
-        I'm not doing it in purpose
-        I would be happy to do it the tenth

F. Justification
-        I have to go to Barcelona
-        I have really severe headaches
-        I have to go to the doctor to Barcelona
-        I have to go the same day that I have the examination
-        it was impossible because this doctor to get an appointment it's really hard
-        I really have to go that day
-        There's nothing I can do to change that
-        I really tried to change the appointment but he couldn't
-        it's really impossible for me
-        I knew the date of my appointment three days ago
-        I called the doctor and they said that they couldn't change the appointment
-        the other appointment they give is —I don't know a month from now
-        I really can't wait that long

APPENDIX 2:
SUMMARY OF THE VARIABLES AND STRATEGIES ANALYZED

STUDENT	ATTAINABLE GOAL		CLOSE SOCIAL DISTANCE	ENGLISH = CATALAN
S1	YES/NO		NO	NO
S2	YES	YES	YES	
S3	NO	NO	NO	
S4	YES	YES	YES	
S5	YES	NO	NO	
S6	NO	YES/NO	NO	
S7	YES/NO		YES/NO	NO
S8	YES	YES	YES	
S9	YES/NO		YES/NO	NO

STUDENT	TOPIC PRESENTATION	CONFRONT	ACKNOW. OF RESPONSIBILITY		CONFLICT SOLUTION	EMOTIVE FUNCTION	JUSTIFIC. DETAILS
S1	—	1	4 (ACCEPT)	3	—	7	
S2	—	10	4	4	12	6	
S3	PROBLEM	1	2 (ACCEPT)		—	1	3
S4	—	2	10	5	8	13	

S5	PROBLEM	5	—		1		—	1
S6	PROBLEM	1	—		—		1 3	
S7		PROBLEM	1	2			1 1	2
S8		—	3	1			1 2	0
S9		PROBLEM	2	3 (ACCEPT)			1 1	0

a