Using Cultural Information to Enhance Small Group Communication

By Sue Sutherland-Hanson

Required linguistic courses for teachers preparing to teach ESL (English as a Second Language) often include a cultural linguistics class. The focus of this type of linguistics is how culture influences communication. It can include body language, proximities, levels of formality, and turn-taking. How does a speaker give a turn to another, indicate attention, or a desire to speak? This becomes an aspect of culture and language that can have an effect on team or group work from informal pairs to major class projects. The following is an interesting though extreme example of turn-taking:

Nordic cultures, for example, are said to relish long delays between one turn and the next. As the report goes, “Two brothers of Häme (Finland) were on their way to work in the morning. One says, ‘It is here that I lost my knife’. Coming back home in the evening, the other asks, ‘Your knife, did you say?’” (11). Or receiving visitors in the North of Sweden: “We would offer coffee. After several minutes of silence the offer would be accepted. We would tentatively ask a question. More silence, then a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’” (12). Compare this preference for silence between turns with the reported “fast rate of turn-taking” and “preference for simultaneous speech” in New York Jewish conversation (13) or the “anarchic” conversation of an Antiguan village, in which there is said to be “no regular requirement for 2 or more voices not to be going on at the same time” (12)

http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2705608/

The above examples suggest that the rate for turn-taking which means to give or take an opportunity to speak in a paired conversation or group discussion is widely influenced by culture. In the United States, it is not O.K. for two people to talk at one time in a conversation, but the volley of turns in a classroom or good small-group discussion can go pretty fast. The research below suggests that pacing and pauses are not the only culturally influenced cues that invite another’s turn.

Turn-taking is one of the basic mechanisms in conversation, and the convention of turn-taking varies between cultures and languages; therefore, learners of a foreign language may find it difficult to take their turns naturally and properly in other tongues. http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/cels/essays/matefltesldissertations/fkdis.pdf

Learning another language includes a lot more than vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. To become proficient at using a language, the learner must learn the subtle culturally influenced cues. Imagine studying college level subjects in a second language as your ESL classmates are attempting.
Many times ESL students have told me that the single most challenging context to follow spoken English is in student groups or class discussions. Probably the main reason for difficulty here is a need for more vocabulary and practice with listening comprehension. However, if there is confidence in comprehension, then some of the difficulty is that they don’t know how to make it known that they have something to add. In other words, they don’t know how to comfortably take their turn.

There are other factors that influence “turn-taking” for internationals. In hierarchical cultures, one’s perception of status becomes very important. Students from status-oriented cultures may defer to older students, native speakers, men, teachers, the wealthy, etc. By “defer”, I mean choosing not to add to the discussion because it may feel like committing the rudeness of disagreeing which would make the speaker feel very uncomfortable. Again, “knowing” that it is different here does not translate into practice because what is considered appropriate is deeply ingrained.

I imagine that some (depending on the cultural background) feel like a polite American might feel in a culture where it is acceptable for both people to be speaking at one time. Even though this American might know this is friendly behavior, the American would have a very difficult time feeling comfortable with something that has been deemed rude back home since they s/he was a child.

An important experience for students in college is group work and it is in this context that turn-taking can cause problems. I had my own version of a miscommunication that stemmed from this when I lived in Japan. I considered myself pretty experienced and culturally prepared to live in Japan, but I caught myself using American norms of turn-taking to interpret a discussion I was having with a Japanese colleague. I assumed that my co-worker did not have an opinion about the politics or business topic at hand because he was silent. In fact, he had a lot to say but was waiting to be asked and “given” his turn which I never gave him.

I saw the same situation happen in a coordinated college class I team-taught. We combined an advanced ESL class with an intercultural communications class. My team teacher and I carefully mixed the groups to include internationals with native English speaking students for a final project. Though we had formally studied cultural influences on communication, one group in particular was having a hard time. One confident American student comfortably took leadership and the group met several times before an international student came to us to complain that this student leader never accepted group members’ ideas.

When we talked to the American student, he assumed that the ESL students’ silence was a rather frustrating lack of interest or engagement. He did not believe they had anything to offer. It was clear that this was a classic example of misinterpreting turn-taking.
The following excerpt talks about how difficult it is for people to know what is emic (cultural) versus what is etic (universal or human nature). If we think something is human nature, and someone’s behavior works against that nature, we will respond with confusion at best and anger at worst.

Edward T. Hall, in his seminal work *The Silent Language*, says that culture is “out of awareness”, which is precisely why we tend not to realize that we “have”, or belong to, a culture. We have picked up certain beliefs and behaviors through every succeeding moment of our existence, and not because our parents or other people have explicitly told us “Do this” or “Don’t do that” [...].

Due to the fact that people are unaware of having learned their cultural behavior, they tend to assume that their group’s way of thinking or acting is human nature. Hence they respond with shock or anger when other people behave in ways they interpret as illogical, unreasonable, or impolite. Before jumping to this conclusion, and placing the conflict or misunderstanding on an interpersonal level, it is often helpful to look at the situation from an intercultural point of view. Most people are not aware of how much their culture shapes their attitudes towards time, space, body language, and interpersonal communication, to name three major areas of difference. [http://www.tesol-france.org/articles/fries.pdf](http://www.tesol-france.org/articles/fries.pdf)

Our topic of turn-taking fits under the above category of interpersonal communication and perhaps if a simple raising our hand signals a desire to interject or ask a question, we could say that body language relates to our topic as well. Some Americans may feel that it is the ESL student’s responsibility to learn how Americans “do it here”. I agree that the ESL student should be as aware and competent in managing these specific cultural influences, but I think the American interested in good grades, human relations, and future business communication can create a more effective and win-win response.

The goal and challenge for students in classrooms and business settings is to be alert and active desiring the best communication exchange possible. Knowing *everybody’s* ideas gives all involved a better chance at more success. Native English speakers can try considering quiet internationals as an opportunity to build and practice international communication strategies. Of course there are plenty of ESL students from cultures that engage in robust and lively exchanges such as say Brazil or Saudi Arabia, but there are other cultures that offer a more precise and determined turn-taking approach and students from these linguistic groups may need group support in getting heard. It could be as simple as asking each member of the team if they have a comment or question every so often. Asking each member to write down comments and questions at the end of a group planning session could be a great way to give an alternative medium to relay ideas and to begin the following meeting.
An additional benefit with the above tactics is the inclusion of quiet native English speakers. In most groups there are introverts who do not process or feel comfortable contributing or vying for a turn to speak. A good leader in student group or business meeting or marketing role, actively elicits the ideas and comments of the stake-holders. Often this mines valuable ideas that quiet people keep to themselves especially if they are unsure of the value of their ideas or ability to communicate well. I see this when I teach online classes. I have introverted students who say very little in class and then online when everyone must contribute, they show that they are thoughtful and bright people. You may have future patients or clients that need your active listening support. In our diverse country and on this globe of international business or political interactions, your ability to communicate patiently and effectively with diverse speaker types would be a huge asset.

Not only the native English speakers, but also the English language learners need to adopt an informed, proactive, and constructive communication plan. The ESL student especially from backgrounds with more governed turn-taking styles needs to challenge him or herself to practice American style turn-taking or at find some way to participate and give ideas. Offering no ideas can be interpreted as not caring. One strategy might be as simple as committing to actively add one comment or one question despite a lack of comfort. It can also help to tell the team something like: “I may need to ask you to repeat or to help me understand something you say because I’m learning English, and I don’t always understand.” Another helpful strategy is to ‘repeat back’ to check your understanding. For example, the ESL student could say, “Let me check my understanding. Did you say…..?” Also, and quite simply, the ESL student can try raising his or her hand to show that s/he would like to add something. The language learner can also speak to the leader after the group saying that you’d like to offer an idea to the group at the beginning of the next group. If there is an email exchange, this request could go in the email. The point is to be pro-active and participate actively. The students in the project groups need to know that all the team members including ESL students are engaged, interested, and willing to offer their input.

Intercultural communication can be difficult but rewarding especially when both the language learner and the native speaker see discussions as a way to practice cross-cultural communication. In this age when culture and language groups easily have contact, the people who have strategies to listen and be heard will make the biggest difference in business, politics, and interpersonal relationships. Students at Edmonds Community College have great educational opportunities to practice this skill if they choose to accept the challenge.