

Influencing through language – university students’ argumentation strategies

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This article investigates university students’ argumentation skills in their efforts to influence fellow students through language. The project was implemented at the University of Kuopio and the subjects, both Finnish and foreign university students, spoke English as a lingua franca. The students were required to argue in roles either ‘for’ or ‘against’ in videotaped debates. The aim was to determine how well they managed and what problems arose. In this demanding speech situation the students applied collaborative strategy, repetition, rephrasing and topic negotiation. Problems were caused mainly by the difficult topics and unknown terminology. However, there was a strong sense of commitment and joint effort.

Keywords: debate, lingua franca, pragmatics, argumentation strategies

1 Introduction

This paper is based on a broader research project carried out at the University of Kuopio in spring 2006 with a group of international university students as the subjects. My main aim was to ascertain what kind of argumentation strategies the students would have available when acting out given roles in debate situations where they would have to take the roles of opponents or proponents and try to influence their fellow students with their argumentation skills. In addition, I wanted to investigate what kinds of problems, if any, the students would have, and how the problems would be solved. In the academic communities of the globalizing world, more and more degree courses are arranged in English. Similarly,

more and more foreign students mediated by different exchange programmes participate in these courses, in which English is used as a *lingua franca*. My hypothesis was that the students would find appropriate strategies to manage in the debates, because they were used to working in a multicultural group and the roles would give them the necessary confidence and opportunity to cope with the demanding linguistic task. Argumentation strategies comprise clarity and explicitness of arguments, repetition, rephrasing, and topic negotiation (Mauranen 2007). My goal was to investigate whether the students would unconsciously or consciously be able to resort to these strategies. Cooperative strategies, which include collaborative reasoning, collaborative argumentation and interactive multicultural communication, create a situation where the students begin to work as teams, a necessary tool for the success of a debate (Grice 1975; Mauranen 2003). The purpose of the study was to obtain new ideas for EFL pedagogy and teacher training at universities and other educational institutions.

2 Background

My personal interest in university students' communication skills was awakened at the University of Kuopio in the 1980s and 1990s while teaching ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses to students of various disciplines at the university. The students were advanced readers of difficult academic texts, but their oral skills were often very poor; and as speakers in communication situations they were very reserved and inhibited. The aim of my pilot study in 1985 was to identify what problems caused communication breakdowns and how these problems were solved. The pilot study consisted of role plays with university students in their future professional roles and native speakers as patients and clients. The role plays were performed in both informative and persuasive settings. The results indicated that students with poorer linguistic skills, but with some experience of practical working life, managed better because they knew what to say and the role gave them the confidence to overcome the problems.

3 Debate

3.1 Debate as a special genre of discourse

The present study, which belongs to the field of sociolinguistics, deals with the debate type of discourse practice; and the theory applied is based on a discourse

analytical framework. The approach is pragmatic and the language use belongs to the field of English as a lingua franca.

Debate can be defined as a formal method of interactive and position representational argument (Ylikoski 1987). In debating, the interaction is based on arguing and protesting. A debate has to have a goal. Typically, it has an internal structure, comprising the following: 1) a set of assumptions or premises, 2) a method of reasoning or deduction, and 3) a conclusion or point.

Classical logic based on Aristotelian rhetorics is often regarded as the traditional method of reasoning in which so that the conclusion follows logically from the assumptions or support. In argumentation, grounds are given to make the assumption logical and believable. The better the grounds and reasons are, the more likely it is that the assumption will be accepted. An assertive and persuasive manner of speaking makes an argument more effective. In conversational debates the demands for structure are not as strict as in political or parliamentary debates. Argument gives the grounds for believing in a statement or disbelieving it. The grounds are based on a logical conclusion or thesis, and we use the argument to defend our assumption (Kakkuri-Knuuttila 2007). The definition put forward in van Eemeren and Grootendorst's (1992) textbook *Argumentation, Communication and Fallacies* explicitly links arguments and the expression of opinions to persuasion. Argumentation is a social, intellectual verbal activity that serves to justify or refute an opinion, consists of a constellation of statements and is directed towards obtaining the approbation of an audience. At the end of argumentation the parties should come to the conclusion that the argumentation of one of them can be accepted.

Participants in a debate session normally form two opposite parties; sometimes a moderator and audience are also involved in the debate. In this study, the students had roles as proponents and opponents, and the theme of the debate was given to them. There was no moderator. The structure of debates normally comprises the opening move, a series of arguments and the final remarks. The debaters should avoid confrontation and altercation; they should maintain a calm, assertive voice and give their reasons and grounds logically and clearly (Ylikoski 1987). Studies of arguments as dispute sequences have stressed the crucial role of adversative activities such as challenge, contradiction, negation and other forms of opposition (Coulter 1990; Goodwin 1990; Maynard 1985). Arguments are likely to end in stalemate or stand-offs that enable participants to save face and move on to other activities. Argumentation theories give very strict norms for debates. In my analysis, I try to investigate to what extent the students can apply the strategies according to Mauranen's (2007) model. Successful communication in

culturally complex situations requires adaptability and intercultural negotiation skills (Mauranen 2007).

3.2 Theoretical framework of the study

The analysis is based on Halliday's (1978, 1994) systemic-functional theory and on the model created by Glenn F. Stillar (1998). According to Halliday, language resources are organized along the lines of three general functions, viz. ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Halliday (1978: 114) states that a "sociological semantics implies not so much a general description of the semantic system of a language but rather a set of context-specific semantic descriptions, each one characterizing the meaning potential that is typically associated with a given situation type". For specific analytical purposes, it is possible to focus on a particular function in a text or part of a text, but all the message-carrying units of the language exhibit the three types of functional meaning (Stillar 1998).

My main concerns in the analysis are the speech functions of the utterances. In discourse, the speakers and listeners have dialogic roles assigned by the speech function of sentences. On the basis of the four interactive roles in the language event, Stillar (1998) divides the categories of speech functions into statement, question, command and exclamation. Speech functions are influenced by contextual and situational factors (such as politeness). In the present study, mainly statements and questions occur; and the focus of the analysis is the speech functions creating the contextual and situational messages.

4 Lingua franca

English as a lingua franca (ELF) and English as an international language (EIL) are one and the same phenomenon, both referring to lingua franca uses of English primarily by non-mother tongue speakers (Jenkins 2007). Other terms that have been used are global English, universal English, contact language, auxiliary language, trade language and trade jargon (Jenkins 2007). Communication where all interactants are non-native speakers of the language used can be called lingua franca. Today, English is the most common lingua franca, used daily in this way by millions of people.

In the European Union there are 23 official languages, and all EU member states have the right to use their own language. Moreover, all major EU documents must be in all official languages of the Union. Similarly, the EU is committed to producing the necessary interpreter and translator services (Charles,

in press). All minority language groups and cultures want to keep their own languages and cultures, which influences the role of English as lingua franca. The challenges for foreign language pedagogy are increasing rapidly.

Research into English as a lingua franca is just setting off the ground. In earlier studies, ELF was referred to as 'learner English'. Mauranen has worked intensively to collect a vast academic ELF for her project, and research within this project has been implemented at the universities of Turku, Tampere and Helsinki. Several theses have been written on the basis of this corpus, and various linguistic and pragmatic features have been investigated. The other corpus under construction is the Vienna-Oxford ELF Corpus of English (VOICE) (Jenkins & Seidlhofer 2001; Seidlhofer 2003). It is also a spoken language corpus, including all kinds of private and public dialogues and group discussions among non-native speakers.

Ahvenainen's study (2005), carried out at the University of Jyväskylä, has identified features of ELF similar to those in the present study. Ahvenainen employed the term "problem-solving mechanism" to describe collaborative strategies when analyzing unpleasant moments and breakdowns in communication (Kasper 1997; Ahvenainen 2005).

5 Pragmatic approach

In pragmatics, the interest lies in the use of language in various situations, language usage and the functions of language. The research interest is in the language user and in the event, in what is said, how it is said and what is the result. The term pragmatics was coined by Charles Morris in 1938. According to him, the pragmatic perspective provides insight to the connection between language and human life in general. Hence, pragmatics is also the link between linguistics and the rest of the humanities and social sciences. Verschueren (1999) wanted to emphasize the meaningful functioning of language in general, the meaning in relation to context, claiming that principles of coherence and relevance in building arguments have a close affinity with rhetorics and pragmatics. Austin's speech act theory (1962) emphasized the role of the speaker, the functional meaning of the utterance and the effect of the message on the hearer.

Searle (1969) developed Austin's speech act theory further, but his use of loose, formal verbs has been criticized. Grice (1975) emphasized the importance of collaboration in conversation, calling it the Cooperative Principle, and pointed out that all interactants should cooperate in the conversation by contributing to the ongoing speech event.

Halliday's theory of language, consisting of three functions of the language, has already been explained in Section 3. Leech (1983) is another pragmatist who has emphasized the role of the interpersonal and textual functions of language.

In Finland, the University of Tampere has a long tradition in organizing courses on debating, and Kakkuri-Knuutila has investigated the language of arguments (2007). At present, many other universities organize courses on debating, and on-line courses have become popular with students. Some IB schools in Finland have organized debate competitions in English with very strict instructions concerning argumentation and the length of the debate. By analyzing pragmatic speech events, the present study attempts to investigate to what extent multicultural groups of students were able to use argumentation strategies applying various speech functions in their messages.

6 Data and methods

The aim of this study was to ascertain what kinds of strategies university students had available in a demanding linguistic situation when using English as a *lingua franca*. The research questions were:

- (1) How well do the students manage in the debate situation and what are the problems, if any?
- (2) What kind of argumentation strategies do the students have?

According to my hypothesis, the students would use repetition, rephrasing and restructuring, and topic negotiation to introduce the meaning of their messages; and they would employ collaborative strategy while debating. The speech functions would be expressed in statements, questions, arguments and counter-arguments of the messages.

My data comprise four (4) debate sessions which were videotaped at the University of Kuopio in spring 2006. The participants consisted of university students (N=33), both Finnish (N=21) and foreign (N=12) students. All students were completing their MPH (Master of Public Health) studies. The language of their two-semester degree course was English, which for all of them was their first foreign language, i.e. the *lingua franca*. The proficiency level of all students was upper intermediate or advanced. The MPH degree course had covered the most important issues in Public Health; and all topics, including lectures, essays

and group discussions, had been dealt with during the seminar. The African course leader had chosen the following two topics for the debates:

- *Restriction of alcohol under the age of eighteen encourages young people to abuse alcohol (D1 and D2)*
- *Abstinence is the best possible solution to prevent HIV/AIDS (D3 and D4)*

The students had been divided into four groups and each group was split into two subgroups. The students were given the topics for their debate when the groups, in turn, entered the room for the debate. They did not know the topic in advance. The students could take their seats and have a short time for preparation. After a brief introduction to my research project and the students' role in it, the session began. After they had heard about the project, the students had to debate on their own without a chair or moderator. A technician was in charge of videoing, and the course leader and I were in the room monitoring the debate.

After the debate sessions, the students could view the videos and were given questionnaires with questions concerning the debate, their previous studies of English, their own evaluation of their proficiency level, the problems they had had, and their opinions about supply of argumentation courses in the future. Because not all Finnish students had been pleased with the topics, a new debate session with new themes was provided for them later. Unfortunately, only three foreign students took part in that session, and therefore the debates cannot be compared with those videoed with the groups.

7 Analysis of the debates

The debates were transcribed and analyzed, but multimodal features were not analyzed in this part of the project. The average length of the debates was 11 minutes. The lengths of the turns were recorded, and the participation framework illustrates the activity of each speaker. Two of the Finnish participants did not speak at all. On average, the foreign students had longer turns than the Finns did. The subgroups consisted of 4–5 participants. In each group there was at least one foreign student. The general atmosphere revealed a joint effort and willingness to create an active debate, and all groups showed signs of collaborative activity (Grice 1975; Mauranen 2003). Most students apparently wanted to take part in the assertive discourse and gave a dynamic and energetic impression with their committed participation.

Clarity and explicitness were typical features in these debates. The students clearly wanted to be very logical in their argumentation. They introduced their arguments, supported and refuted arguments made by others, and made counterarguments; sequences of arguments were frequent. The students had a strong willingness to collaborate as a team and they succeeded in this fairly well. In most cases the arguments were structured well, and the aim was to be assertive and to express meaning clearly and efficiently. Frequently used strategies were repetition, rephrasing and topic negotiation.

7.1 Structure of debates and speech functions

A debate usually has a fixed structure: opening, section of reasoning and argumentation, and the final remarks or the conclusion (see Chapter 3.1) and it never aims at a compromise. On the contrary, the participants should, on the basis of logical and relevant argumentation, be able to come to a conclusion and agree that one of the participating teams, on the basis of its well-grounded argumentation, is right. Active counterargumentation weakens the strength of the opposing team and the possibility to reach agreement.

Speech function has a predominantly relational value (Stillar 1998). It constructs speech roles, the speakers who ask, answer, comment, argue etc. In a debate situation, the initial move may be a statement or a question. This leads to an answer or a counter-argument. Thematic structure is developed by means of speech functions. According to Halliday (1978), "language can effectively express ideational and interpersonal meanings only because it can create text". The contents and meaning of the messages given create the contextual atmosphere of the debate, and thus the importance of argumentation is emphasized. The speech functions of the debaters appear in questions, answers, arguments, counterarguments, commands and different kinds of sequences of speech functions.

The students had no instructions as to the structure or the contents of the debates; they were given only the theme and their role in the debate. Some of the foreign students had clearly had orientation to debates at their own universities. For example, the African participants could give their opinions clearly, and their reasoning was well organized.

The role of the initial move has been discussed in the literature on interaction (Edmonson 1981). According to Lampi (1986), openings are important because they are largely responsible for establishing the climate of the setting, e.g. in business contexts.

In Debates 1 and 2 the initial move was made by a student from the group 'Against'. In Debates 3 and 4 the opening move was made by a student from the group 'For'.

The first example represents a typical opening move stating the theme of the debate and the position of the group. (Abbreviations: D = debate, F = 'For', A = 'Against')

(1)D1A01: We thought that ... er ... restrictions are not that good ... er ... to set them ... at the age of eighteen because ... er ... we think that when there are no restrictions or maybe ... er ... people can get access to alcohol at a lower age of eighteen ... er ... it won't be then interesting any more ...

The speaker was a Dutch girl and, interestingly, she spoke in plural form ('we thought') indicating that she spoke on behalf of her group. In Debate 2, the student began by comparing the drinking habits in her own country, the Netherlands, with those in the United States. She spoke in the first person, because she gave a personal example from her own country.

(2)D2A02: I found data about the difference between the USA drinking habits and the Netherlands and there was in ... there that ... er ... in the Netherlands they drink LESS than in the US and that's because ... er ... the young people are not so courageous about how it is to drink because it's they are allowed to in the Netherlands and in the USA it's a big deal for them because they they can do it ...

The above example also illustrates the multicultural aspect of the debate. Explanation of differences in drinking habits is clearly intensified by three 'because' clauses. Repetition as a strategy of argumentation will be analyzed in the next chapter (7.2).

In Debate 3 a student from the group 'For' opened the debate by saying:

(3)D3F01: Okay ... I think ... for the first argument we would say it's the best way because it's the safest way because ... condoms and other things they can broke ... but ... abstinence is one good way ... it's like you can't get HIV if you have ... you use this abstinence in ... HIV means that not with the sexual transcourse ... that's our first argument and you can respond it ... LAUGHS ... if you want ...

The turn included features similar to those in the previous examples. The final statement: “and you can respond it . . . if you want” was a speech function indicating command and made the speaker laugh, because the turns are normally taken, not given or commanded.

As for the closing, Debates 1, 2 and 3 came to a natural end when the topic had been thoroughly dealt with and the students seemed to have stated all their arguments. In Debate 4 the groups had had a long argument with many arguments, counterarguments, questions, answers and clarification concerning abstinence, the use of condoms, and sex education, and a Finnish female student from group ‘For’ said in a very cheerful voice: “I think you’ve beaten us”. Everybody was laughing; the students clearly had the feeling that they had played their roles well and now they felt relaxed and relieved. Humour is an important factor in discourse; and laughing together, a cooperative strategy as well, created a sense of relief among the students.

7.2 Argumentation strategies

The students aimed at logical reasoning, effective argumentation and collaboration. In their arguments they introduced facts, figures, evidence, examples and relevant references to statistical information. Repetition, rephrasing, reformulation, clarity, and topic negotiation were the most commonly used strategies. The groups were consciously applying a cooperative strategy.

Mauranen (2007: 246) has stated that “bearing in mind the diversity of the students’ variable skills in English, participants’ adaptive strategies must lean heavily on cooperation. Gaps in shared knowledge can be bridged by strategies of enhanced clarity and explicitness. Cooperation and explicitness are foregrounded as strategies of social interaction in linguistically and culturally hybrid context”.

Repetition appears either in self-repetition or other-(allo-)repetition. Repetition can be used in statements, questions, facts and single words. Repetition and rephrasing are basic ways of influencing. Reformulation of the immediately preceding utterance can also be regarded as the same strategy (Mauranen 2007). ‘What I mean’, ‘I mean’ were repeatedly used in debates to clarify the message.

Discourse reflexivity, also known as ‘metadiscourse’ and meaning discourse about discourse, is according to Mauranen (2007) a basic indispensable property of language communication. It is necessary for organizing the ongoing interaction and can undoubtedly be regarded as a strategy in debate.

The use of questions was a strategy which was frequently used in argumentation by both groups. 'Do you really mean that', 'My question is', or 'I would like to ask' occurred often during the debates. Repetition of questions was also a frequently used strategy. In a sequence both parties could resort to questions.

(4)D1F04: Do you REALLY think that ... er ... old drunk people are responsible ...

A student from the group 'Against' in the same debate a bit later:

A01: Do you really think that the restrictions are doing a good thing ... all the time ... here in Finland? I heard from Finnish people of thirteen year olds who are getting drunk all the time ... and they are not allowed to get alco but they DO get it ... so do you think that the restrictions help?

In the next example the counterargument was made in the form of a question. The key word 'restriction' was repeated in the counterargument.

(5)D2F02: But there ARE restrictions in Netherlands as well, aren't there?

A01: ... er ... sixteen

F02: yeah but there ARE restrictions

A repetition-like list of adjectives was also an efficient strategy. The Finnish female student was talking about change of attitudes: "...making them think that it's not cool, it's not nice, it's not funny, it's not anything you should do when you are young..."

A culture-dependent way of thinking and arguing appeared in the Chinese student's argument. This is also an example of deviation from the topic or fallacious argument and of how the opposing group wanted to return to the theme.

(6)D2A02: ... er ... we think that restriction is not a good way to er come through alcohol abuse ... for example ... the same ... the ... sex education I can give you example ... in China ... no longer there are no longer sex education ... this theme is forbidden by the university or schools so ... but at that time the rate of teen-age mothers are very high so ... er ... for that ten years ago we began to spread sex education ... during education system in that education system not that teenage ... er ... teenage mother ... the rate is very low so you see the restriction is not a good way to come through to better things ... to

- educate them ... the education factor ... let more people know about it ... that's the most important ...
- F01: yeah .. the first thing is that education and then restriction ... what's wrong with the restriction ...
- F02: yeah we can have both ...
- A01: we can have both

In his argument the Chinese student brought up the importance of the education factor, and this argument was supported by both 'For' and 'Against' groups. The question 'do you think', 'if you think' and the statement 'I think', 'we think' were the most commonly used expressions in developing argumentation. The following example introduces an interesting question – answer – question – answer sequence.

- (7)D3F04: I think ... er ... educating people to use these ... condoms or others ... is more expensive than the ... dating them or letting them ... to abstain ... because the normal natural population unclear) .s also there ... in most African countries ... for example in my country ... er ... people naturally abstain from sex ... they keep their virginity
- A03: until when?
- F01: until they get married
- A03: and when is that
- F01: it's ... in twenties ... twenty ... or twenty-two ... three ... could be more ..

In Debate 3 on HIV/AIDS there is plenty of rephrasing because of the difficult terminology:

- (8)D3F01: and I said ... the sexual intercourse for that reason that I meant that only for their sexual intercourse ... I wasn't speaking about other ... other ways ...
- F03: ... and seventy-five per cents of HIV infections are transmitted by sex ...
- F01: sexual ... yeah ... sexual intercourse
- F02: so if you avoid it it's the best way ...
- F01: yeah ...

The above example also indicates cooperative communication within the group 'For'.

The next example shows the African way of thinking by giving reference to many facts and examples

- (9)D1F05: yeah we must take into account the consequences and the pattern of being ... addicted to it or ... er the harmful effects as a result of ... er ... abuse ... adults

are usually ... already know what they are being exposed to and .. er er adol ... adolescents tend to be more adventurous and ... er ... the ... drunkenness whatever might arise from it ... is not .. er ... it didn't because there is that reward in ... in the actual turn of it ... hmmm that makes them to want more ... and ... if you should compare their responsibility and their position in society ... with adults ... adults are already kind of settled and ... they are looking forward to ... towards death

This statement was followed by the following sequence of arguments: rebuttal – counter argument – rebuttal:

- (10)D1A01: But I think when you are eighteen years old you are still: adventurous and ...
- F05: not in the sense ... as fourteens or fifteens ... curious ... getting to know ..
- A01: yeah but I think fourteen or fifteen years olds are more .. they already know what they are doing ... when you are eighteen you still want to try everything and maybe even more when you are fourteen ...

7.3 Problems

The problems of the students were either due to the difficult topic or to a lack of proper vocabulary. Topic negotiation was the strategy used when the students tried to carry on the theme of the debate. The use of roles in the debates contributed to the fact that the students were committed to the situation and to their roles. In addition, they were acting as a team by adopting a collaborative strategy, and the problematic and unpleasant moments were solved as a team.

The search for words was solved by rephrasing and reformulation. In one case the student couldn't find the word and abandoned the effort by saying 'Help me':

- (11)D1F02: I don't think that anyone knows what they are doing when they are drunk
- A03: ... not when they are drunk but when becoming drunk before they are in a better ... er ... HELP ME ... LAUGHS ... ALL ARE LAUGHING

Laughter may have several functions in communication situations. In this case it was a marker of failure but it also created a happy atmosphere in the midst of the strained debate.

8 Results

The aim of this study was to investigate how well university students cope in debate situations with English as a lingua franca. The students had to act out roles, playing either the 'opponent's' or the 'proponent's' role. Two groups dealt with the theme of alcohol legislation in Finland, and two groups dealt with the HIV/AIDS theme. In all, there were four 'pro' and four 'con' groups. Most students were committed to their task and played their roles with great zeal and involvement. The use of 'we' indicated the togetherness of the group. The students had a strong communicative strategy as a group and they co-operated actively. The strategies used were repetition, rephrasing, reformulation, clarity and explicitness and topic negotiation. The most common markers of disagreement were 'but', 'yes but', 'but I think that', 'but because', 'because I think that', 'I don't agree'. Speech functions in statements, questions and arguments were analyzed. Most students participated actively in the debates, except for two girls who did not say a word. Silence may have been their strategy, because also silence counts (Edmonson 1981).

9 Conclusion

The results of the study indicate that the students coped fairly well with the demanding task in which they had to cope in English without preliminary practice. Their level of proficiency was good enough to provide them with the necessary skills for the debate. The theme of the debate plays a decisive role in the success of the debate. The more difficult the topic is, the more demanding is the task for the students. Roles may be efficient ways to practice ELF discourse.

In the answers given in the questionnaires, the students expressed their willingness to participate in courses that emphasize debating and argumentation, if such courses were offered by the university. In the globalizing world, English is used more and more extensively, and argumentation skills are necessary in many fields. Fairclough (2006) states that we cannot adequately understand globalization as a reality without taking language – discourse into account. Awareness of various features of discourse and learning critical thinking in international discourse in the globalizing world is of utmost importance. Content-based ELF pedagogy faces the challenge of promoting students' skills in the domain of debating and argumentation.

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