ASIAN STUDENTS' COMPREHENSION OF AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH

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1. INTRODUCTION

Many studies of language contact discuss the situations in which the languages are used (domains), the characteristics of the languages spoken by bilinguals (interference) or the stages of learning a second language (interlanguage). In Bradley and Bradley (1984) we have done an extensive study of errors in English as a foreign language, spoken by a large sample of Asian students studying in Australia; but in this paper[1] a different viewpoint is adopted.

It seems that comprehension, as opposed to production, in face-to-face language contact situations has been neglected. While testing of comprehension is one of the main ways of measuring second language ability, it has concentrated on the *content* of the answers rather than the *form* of them, and has neglected the interactional characteristics of communication breakdown. We have attempted to remedy this gap.

This paper discusses failure of comprehension of spoken Australian English by students from Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. A hierarchical classification of responses indicating incomprehension is developed and applied to data from a large corpus of interviews with these students, to clarify the pattern observed. Differences based on national origin, time spent in Australia, and whether Higher School Certificate (HSC) was done in Australia are quantified; a discussion of the correlation between comprehension and speaking ability follows, and finally the relation between incomprehension and the content and structure of the preceding question is briefly investigated.

Because one cannot usefully ask a non-native speaker of English what he thinks every question might mean, comprehension can only be judged by the responses observed. It is not always easy to determine whether a misunderstanding has taken place, but often the earlier or later context will reveal this. Any tourist who has visited Asian countries has had the experience of talking to local people who listen politely, say 'yes' and smile; but it later turns out that they did not understand a word of the 'conversation'. Long recorded face-to-face interviews, which may be further analysed, can be used effectively to determine how well a person understands English.

The data for this paper is a corpus of 47 interviews with Thai, Indonesian and Malaysian private students studying in Melbourne in 1982. The primary goal of the study was to measure the students' English speaking ability, and to classify and quantify errors in the use of phonology, morphology, syntax, and discourse.

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The students for this intensive case-study were a quota sample, representative of the overall student population from these three countries: students doing HSC, undergraduate and postgraduate studies were interviewed; the undergraduates included some who had and some who had not previously completed HSC in Australia; some in universities and some in colleges or institutes. The tertiary students, undergraduate and postgraduate, were almost all students of engineering and science, or students of economics and related disciplines. The reason for selecting students from these three countries was that Thais, Indonesians, and Malay-medium educated Malaysians were observed to have greater English language problems than students from other countries which contribute substantially to Australia's overseas student intake; the intention was to measure these language problems.

The interviews were conducted by native speakers of the 'cultivated' variety of Australian English who attempted to establish a rapport with the students; they were quite long, providing a large quantity of speech. Most of the questions asked were highly predictable in context, and most of the students would have encountered many of the questions in other situations. Thus, in general, speech flowed rather freely; but comprehension problems did arise fairly frequently. One of the authors of this paper went through all 47 interviews, located all apparent instances of misunderstanding, and coded them according to the scheme given in the following section. These data were used for a brief discussion of comprehension in Bradley and Bradley (1984:201-205), and are analysed in more detail here.

The main analysis in Bradley and Bradley 1984 is of speaking ability: Chapter Two (27-65) on phonology, Chapter Three by Helen Jenkins (66-100) on morphology, Chapter Four (101-135) on syntax, and Chapter Five by Marta Rado (136-191) on discourse structure. In each case particular phonemes, morphemes, syntactic or discourse structures which appeared to be used incorrectly were systematically observed; and the proportion and types of errors made were quantified. Chapter Six (192-212) summarises speaking ability and discusses the other three language skills briefly; Chapter Seven (213-267) deals with culture-related language and other problems; while Chapter Eight (268-311) concerns culture-related educational problems. We believe this is the most extensive quantified and data-based study of foreigners' English speaking abilities which has been done.

2. DATA AND ANALYSIS

The classification of misunderstanding is based on the non-native speaker's responses to questions. The range of possible replies which reveal lack of comprehension is categorised into six alternatives, as set out and exemplified below. These six represent a scale from greater to lesser breakdown of communication; from strategies for coping with incomprehension which are less native-like, such as no response, to strategies which are also often used by native speakers of English, such as a request for clarification. The less native-like strategies often reflect greater incomprehension, and vice versa; in some cases this cannot be determined. In all cases, however, the response does not really constitute an answer to the question asked.

Instances of misunderstanding were coded according to the following categories:

	no response
major	completely inappropriate response
	partly inappropriate response
minor	echo (partial repetition of question)
	request for repetition
	request for clarification

Cases where the student does not answer the question were considered to be instances of misunderstanding because normally in a conversation one is expected to co-operate by supplying answers to questions (cf. Grice (1975), Labov and Fanshel (1977)). In some types of conversations one may be faced with a hostile speaker who does not respond. This was certainly not the case with our interviews. The students had been informed about the interviews well in advance, and had all agreed to participate. During the interviews they were very co-operative and answered most questions at great length. The following are some examples of questions which were not answered. In most cases after a long pause the interviewer explained the question, and the interviewee replied.

(1) Who ran the primary school that you went to?

(2) Have you any idea how many hours a week you spent doing English at university?

(3) And what did you have to do at the Australian Embassy before they gave you the visa to come here?

Inappropriate answers clearly demonstrate the student's lack of understanding. What is interesting about these answers is the fact that the student obviously thought that he/she was answering the question. That implies that the student was not aware of his own incomprehension. Giving an irrelevant reply leads to loss of face, which is usually avoided at all costs. When the students were aware of the fact that they did not understand some questions they tried to avoid total loss of face, and rather than giving inappropriate answers, they either repeated part of the question, asked the interviewer to repeat the question or requested clarification. The fact that in some cases the students did not resort to any of these face saving alternatives suggests that they were not aware that they did not understand the question. Inappropriate answers were divided into completely and partly inappropriate ones. Completely inappropriate answers indicate total lack of understanding. Below are some examples:[2]

(4) A. You'd recommend to any student who comes here to write to MELCOS first?

B. I'm the only one.

(5) A. Do you think there is more or less emphasis on solving problems here?

B. Yeah.

(6) A. In what situations did you mainly use English in Indonesia?

B. We use Indonesian language in school.

What we have called 'partly inappropriate answers' are also irrelevant and therefore indicate lack of understanding. As in the case of completely inappropriate answers the student is not aware of not comprehending the question,

attempts to answer it, and fails. The replies are, however, less inappropriate than the ones above. Clearly, in at least some of the cases there seemed to be some understanding of the question.

(7) A. Do you understand the words of those? (Moslem prayers)

B. Yeah, prayer all the same, because we do it five times a day.

(8) A. Have you had anything like that before? (English test)

B. No, I the...once or two in probably in the kindergarten.

(9) A. You didn't have any choice, you were given Australia, and were you happy with that?

B. No, we have in fact, we weren't given any choice at all, cause we were offered only to Australia to do our course, I mean that's it, to do our course in Australia, so we didn't have any choice.

In the non-major cases of incomprehension there is no attempt to answer the question at all. It seems that the students are aware of their failure to understand the question, and manage to avoid complete loss of face by using various techniques which both make it more difficult to determine the degree of misunderstanding and make the reply somehow more acceptable to English speakers, more native-like. In some of the replies there is an indication of partical understanding. Many cases, however, are indeterminate.

Partial repetitions of questions occur frequently in native speakers' conversations. The usual reasons for repetitions is that the speaker is stalling so as to have more time to think, or that he is seeking confirmation that he heard and/or understood correctly. The repetition of a part of a question is usually followed by an answer, without any further explanations of the question. In our interviews most cases of repetitions were querying some lexical items. In a few cases the student repeated a portion of the question, and supplied the answer immediately after the repetition, as in:

(10) A. What sorts of things do you read?

B. What sort of things? I read a newspaper.

In most cases, however, the repetition was followed by a pause, or a request for clarification, or a request for a repetition of the whole question, clearly indicating that the student did not understand the repeated words.

(11) A. And what level did you reach? (In school in Thailand).

B. What level?

A. Yes.

B. What do you mean what level?

(12) A. Was there any difference (in the teaching of English in high school) from in primary school?

B. Primary school? What? What is it?

(13) A. Have you found it easy to take part in tutorials here?

B. To take part...? No, again please.

It is interesting to note that the words that the students repeated were sometimes not the ones that they did not understand, as shown in the following exchange:

(14) A. And does writing a thesis come into your education system somewhere?

B. Writing a thesis?

A. Yes.

B. What do you mean, what do you mean when you say that writing a thesis *come in*...?

It would seem that in such cases the students repeated the most prominent part of the question, perhaps in the hope that the interviewer would repeat or explain the whole sentence.

With requests for repetition, it is not possible to tell what and how much the student misunderstood. Unlike a request for clarification (discussed below), a request for repetition does not indicate partial understanding of the question, and in most cases would be considered by native speakers as an admission of total incomprehension. It is, of course, possible that at least in some cases the interviewees did not hear the question. In most cases the interviewers considered requests for repetitions as an indication of incomprehension, and rather than repeating the question, they explained or rephrased it, as illustrated in the following examples:

(15) A. Have you been able to do all the reading that you've been expected to do while studying here?

B. Pardon?

A. Have you been able to do it all, do you find you have time for all the reading?

(16) A. Do students in Thailand get problem solving exercises to do as part of their learning?

B. Again please.

A. Do students in Thailand get problem solving exercises to do? Say when you were studying linguistics there, did you get problems to work out and come up with answers?

(17) A. What sort of tests do you get here?

B. What do you mean?

A. When you get tests and exams what do you have to do? Do you get multiple choice or lots of maths exercises, essays, short answers?

Unlike requests for repetition, which require the repetition or explanation of a whole question, what we have called 'requests for clarification' seek further explanation of a part of the question. The student indicates at least partial understanding of the question by requesting further specification of some part of it which he considers to be too vague or ambiguous, or queries some lexical item. Most replies of this type seek further specification of meaning, implying that the interviewer is at fault, rather than the interviewee, who in fact does not answer the question.

(18) A. Have you found it easy to take part in tutorials here?

B. To take part in what way?

(19) A. Did you think the test was fair?

B. How do you mean by fair?

(20) A. So what level did you get to in school in Thailand?

B. You mean my result?

3. RESULTS

The overall pattern of comprehension failure for the three groups of students is shown in the following table. The numbers indicate the mean for each type of response, in significant turns.[3]

Table 1[4]: Comprehension failure: types of response per significant turn in percent

	Major	Minor	Clarification
T	1.4	2.1	2.5
I	2.3	4.4	2.5
M	1.5	1.8	1.5

This would seem to indicate that the Malaysians understood best, and Indonesians worst. As far as the Malaysians are concerned, this result is not unexpected, since they tend to be significantly better at English than the other two groups. It is however surprising that they did not perform much better. The Indonesians' result is unexpected given the generally better speaking ability of the Indonesians compared to the Thais.

All of the Malaysians had been studying in Australia for less than two years, and in many cases only a few months, when they were interviewed. Thus, they had had less opportunity to get used to Australian English. The Thais, conversely, had all been here well over a year, and in some cases up to six years, while the Indonesians ranged from three months to eight years in their time studying here. The table below shows the patterns of comprehension failure in the three groups for different length of stay in Australia.

Table 2: Comprehension failure: time in Australia

Time in Australia		Types of response per turn in percent		
		Major	Minor	Clarification
	> 4 years	0.5	1.2	1.8
T	2-4 years	1.9	2.1	2.8
	< 2 years	2.1	2.9	3.6
	> 4 years	2.3	3.0	1.3
I	2-4 years	1.9	4.6	2.6
	< 2 years	2.6	5.1	2.9
M	< 2 years	1.5	1.8	1.5

This table shows better comprehension by Malaysians than Thais or Indonesians who have studied here for a similar period. However, the progressive improvement in comprehension of Thais and Indonesians due to staying in Australia is shown, with one minor (0.4 percent) reversal. This improvement is not dramatic but it is substantial; for the Thais, progressing from one response in 12 showing some degree of misunderstanding, to only one in 30, for the Indonesians, starting at more than one in ten and moving to nearly one in 15.

An Australian HSC is clearly a factor in comprehension. In our sample Thai but not Indonesian undergraduates in both main types of course who had done HSC showed better comprehension than those who had not. The Malaysian students in the sample had all done HSC here, or were doing it at the time they were interviewed.

Table 3: Comprehension failure: Australian HSC. Types of response per turn in percent.

	Major	Minor	Clarification
T + HSC	0.6	1.2	1.8
- HSC	2.0	1.4	2.3
I + HSC	0.3	4.8	2.2
- HSC	2.3	2.3	6.7

At any rate, major misunderstandings are dramatically fewer for students with Australian HSC.

The mean of errors of comprehension per significant turn was six percent for the Thais, nine percent for the Indonesians, and five percent for the Malaysians. Individual speakers however vary greatly; from 0 to 20 percent. The following table summarises range of error rates for individuals.

Table 4: Comprehension failure: distribution of individual error rate

Range	T	I	M
$\geq$ 15%	1	2	1
$\geq$ 10%	2	7	-
$\geq$ 5%	9	4	7
< 5%	6	2	6

Individual students also varied greatly in the proportions of different types of misunderstanding. For some, major misunderstandings accounted for as much as 60 percent of all failures of comprehension, while others did not have any. It should however be stressed that most students had fewer major misunderstandings than minor ones and requests for clarification. Also, those who understand better have a substantially lower proportion of major misunderstandings, as well as fewer failures of comprehension in general. This indicates

that simultaneously with the overall improvement in comprehension, the students acquire various strategies for disguising their failure to understand when these occur; that is, they learn to use more native-like face-saving replies in instances where they fail to comprehend.

As noted previously, the results in comprehension differ from the overall performance of the three groups of students. The Malaysians, whose speaking ability was substantially better than that of the two other groups, also show better comprehension. The Indonesians, however, have better speaking ability than the Thais, but seem to understand spoken Australian English less well. It is interesting to see how well understanding correlates with speaking ability for individual students. We have selected three students in each national group whose comprehension was best, and three whose comprehension was the worst. For these 18 students we compared the comprehension ranking with their phonology/syntax ranking.[5] In 13 of the 18 cases, there was a good correlation, and in five cases, a poor correlation. For eight students, the correlation was very good; three were very good at speaking and at understanding, and five were very bad on both. In five cases, the correlation was fairly good, with a comprehension ranking slightly better than the syntax/phonology ranking for four students, and slightly worse for one student. In three cases, there was a very bad correlation, two students had very good speaking ability and poor comprehension, and one poor speaking ability, and in fact, the best comprehension for his group. Finally, in two cases, there was a fairly bad correlation; one with comprehension substantially better than speaking ability, and one the other way around. The table below summarises these results, for the nine top and nine bottom cases in comprehension.

Table 5: Comparison of overall comprehension and speaking results

	Comprehension	
Speaking ability	top	bottom
very good	3	2
good	4	1
(average)	-	-
bad	1	1
very bad	1	5

Of course, there is no necessity for speaking ability and comprehension ability to correlate exactly, though they would often do so, as they do for 13 of the 18 best and worst comprehenders. Individual differences in educational background, time of exposure to spoken English, age when first exposed to spoken English, language ability, and even personality may lead to different levels of error in speaking and comprehending. However, this occurs in only five cases.

If a question is not understood, the lack of comprehension is presumably due to one of several factors. It may contain a word or idiom which is not known; the structure of the question may cause problems; or it may be misheard, sometimes due to problems with the phonology. In this study, phonological problems were minimised by using interviewers familiar with the language difficulties of

foreign learners. They spoke slowly and clearly in relatively cultivated Australian English, the variety most often encountered in educational situations. The form of the question followed by a misunderstanding was investigated in the cases of misunderstanding by the nine worst comprehenders.

It was sometimes possible to be certain from the context that a particular instance of misunderstanding was due to a lexical problem. Of the question-answer dyads cited above, (11) and (12) appear to show difficulties with a particular word in one of its meanings: 'level' and 'primary'; (13) and (14) reveal lack of understanding of idioms: 'take part', 'come in'. This identifiable lexical comprehension failure accounted for 14 percent of all misunderstandings by the nine worst comprehenders; in many other cases, lexical difficulties may also be involved, but the context is not certain and other contributing factors may also have been involved. The clearest cases occur when the response is a result for clarification of the lexical problem, an echo of it, or a complete misunderstanding which is later clarified and corrected.

It is difficult to attribute misunderstanding to any one aspect of structure, since most questions contain several types of morphological, syntactic and cohesive devices; but it is possible to observe how often a given type of structure occurs in the questions which lead to misunderstanding. For example, a passive is found in dyad (9) above, and also a negative; a choice or comparison of two alternatives is required in (4); embedding structures are very frequent; for example, complements in (4), (13), (15) and (18); a relative clause in (1); and an embedded question in (2). Cohesive devices such as ellipsis as in (11) and (12), or third person pronouns as in (7) are also frequent, and may occasionally appear to be the main cause of communication breakdown, as in the following example (which also shows ellipsis).

(21) B. ...And my sister, she was educated in Australia too. That's a long time ago.

A. Was that also in Melbourne?

B. Yeah, in Melbourne.

A. Did she go to school here, or (did she go to) university (here)?

B. Who?

The following table shows the proportion of misunderstood questions which contained each of the above types of structure, ranked from most to least frequent.

Table 6: Percent of misunderstood questions containing a structure

Complement	35%	Comparison/Choice	6%
Ellipsis	18%	Negative	5%
Relative clause	12%	Passive	3%
Embedded question	9%	Third person	2%

Of the misunderstood questions, half contained some type of embedding: a complement, a relative clause, or an embedded question; a few contained more than one type of embedding. Of course, complements are very frequent in English;

and in speaking, the same nine speakers made an average of only seven percent errors in the use of complements. Thus, care should be taken not to attribute 35 percent of the misunderstandings entirely to the presence of a complement in the question.

Ellipsis of various types was the second most frequently present structural characteristic of misunderstood questions; Marta Rado's contribution to this book investigates the use of ellipsis by the interviewees ranked as best and worst in speaking. As for embedding, ellipsis in the question may not be the only factor in a comprehension breakdown, as dyad (21) shows; but it appears to be a significant one. The other structural characteristics of the questions may occur less frequently, but they also contribute to incomprehension.

4. CONCLUSION

It should be noted that the high rate of comprehension shown in the data is partly due to the content of the interview. It contained many questions which the students had frequently been asked, and concerns rather predictable topics. In a less constrained context, one would expect much more misunderstanding; however, subjective judgements concerning poor comprehension of spoken English may in fact be based on rather infrequent instances of incomprehension.

We have presented a classification and hierarchy of types of responses used in cases of lack of comprehension of Australian English, using examples from interviews with 47 students from three countries in Southeast Asia. The overall pattern of communication breakdown according to the main types of response and background of the students was then presented. A more detailed look at the abilities of the best and worst students in comprehension and their ranking on speaking, and a discussion of the characteristics of the question which may lead to incomprehension concluded the presentation of data.

NOTES

1. We are pleased to acknowledge that the data in this study were collected as part of a Commissioned Research Project initiated and funded by the Department of Education and Youth Affairs. The views expressed here, and any errors, are the responsibility of the authors alone.

2. Material in parentheses, here and subsequently, was present in the preceding context but omitted in the turns quoted. This ellipsis is further discussed below; also in Bradley and Bradley 1984:141-151 (part of a chapter by Rado) and in the article in this volume by Rado. In all examples cited, speaker A is the Australian interviewer.

3. A turn is an uninterrupted string of speech by one participant in an interaction. A significant turn contains more than just 'yes', 'no' or some other single-word utterance. Incomprehension is here measured as a proportion of significant turns.

4. T indicates students from Thailand, I those from Indonesia, and M those from Malaysia, in this and subsequent tables. The discussion in this section follows Bradley and Bradley 1984:201-205 closely; Table 1 is from p.202, Table 2 from p.203, and Table 3 from p.204.

5. The ranking of the students on speaking is based on their error rates in seven areas of phonology as discussed in Bradley and Bradley 1984:30-62 and seven areas of syntax in op.cit. 101-132, both summarised in op.cit. 193-195. The ranking on comprehension is based on the proportion of incomprehension per significant turn, not the raw number of responses showing incomprehension. A higher average error rate or proportion of incomprehension naturally results in a lower ranking.

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