

**THE USE OF ADJACENCY PAIRS IN A
SPONTANEOUS GROUP DISCUSSION
WITH FORM SIX STUDENTS**

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the material in this dissertation is my own except for quotations, excerpts, equations, summaries and references, which have been fully acknowledged.

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge of interaction strategies is of utmost importance in determining a smooth flow of conversation or discussion. This study aimed to observe how interaction strategy training with explicit instruction of adjacency pairs might effect the development of conversational proficiency among low proficient learners. The target population involved in this study were low proficient Form Six students in one of the secondary schools at Kunak District. Samples taken had very limited vocabulary in English Language, thus they were unable to participate actively in group discussion and very reluctant to speak. This had caused low score for their MUET Speaking Test. In this study, adjacency pairs (question-answer) were introduced to these learners as a technique in collaborative learning. There were treatment and control groups involved in this study. The data were collected through direct observation. These learners were required to sit for pretest and posttest. It was revealed that after the training the treatment group had used more instances of interaction strategies compared to the control group. Question and answer form were most effectively used in maintaining conversation, selecting speaker and encouraging a reply. The findings showed that the treatment group were more confident in their discussion. They were always alert to the ongoing discussion because questions were posed at the end their speech. Therefore, from the findings of this study it did show that explicit instruction of adjacency pairs facilitates these learners in their discussion.



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ABSTRAK

Pengetahuan mengenai strategi interaksi adalah amat penting dalam menentukan kelancaran perbualan atau perbincangan. Oleh sebab itu, kajian ini dijalankan untuk mengkaji kesan latihan strategi interaksi dengan meningkatkan kesedaran terhadap penggunaan 'adjacency pairs' (soalan-jawapan) dapat meningkatkan kemahiran perbualan untuk pelajar lemah. Populasi dalam kajian ini adalah pelajar Tingkatan Enam yang lemah dalam Bahasa Inggeris di salah sebuah sekolah di Daerah Kunak. Disebabkan penguasaan perbendaharaan kata oleh pelajar ini amat terhad, mereka tidak melibatkan diri secara aktif dalam perbincangan kumpulan dan juga enggan bercakap. Ini telah menyebabkan markah ujian oral MUET mereka adalah rendah. Dengan itu 'adjacency pairs' diperkenalkan untuk pelajar ini sebagai teknik pembelajaran kolaboratif. Terdapat dua kumpulan dalam kajian ini iaitu kumpulan pemulihan dan kawalan. Data telah diambil melalui teknik pemerhatian secara langsung. Mereka juga perlu menduduki ujian sebelum dan selepas latihan. Didapati selepas latihan, kumpulan pemulihan telah menggunakan lebih banyak strategi interaksi yang telah dilatih berbanding dengan kumpulan kawalan. Strategi interaksi yang berbentuk soalan dan jawapan adalah strategi yang paling berkesan digunakan untuk mengekalkan perbualan, memilih penutur dan galakkan untuk menjawab. Dapatan kajian telah menunjukkan bahawa kumpulan pemulihan lebih yakin dan sentiasa memberi tumpuan kepada perbincangan. Ini kerana soalan diajukan apabila mengakhiri perbualan. Dapatan kajian ini telah mendapati kesedaran terhadap penggunaan 'adjacency pairs' (soalan-jawapan) telah membantu pelajar ini dalam kelancaran perbincangan mereka.



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LIST OF SYMBOLS

...	- Pauses not more than 3 seconds
(Number)	- Duration of Pauses
Words in Bold	- Interaction Strategies
<u>Words Underlined</u>	- Adjacency Pairs
(m)	- Minutes
(s)	- Seconds



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The English Language has become an important tool for worldwide communication. It is the best instrument to access to new and global information as it is the language widely used by people globally. In this new millennium where new technologies are rapidly developing, the need to have good command of the English language is crucial in order to easily get access to new and latest information globally. English is also the major language for news and information worldwide. This is in line with the statement made by the Minister of Education, Dato' Hisammuddin Tun Hussein during an opening ceremony of the 5th Malaysian International Conference on English Language Teaching (MICELT) in 2004. He highlighted on the importance of mastering the English language because it is the language widely use globally for seeking knowledge. Therefore, the people of our country especially students who are the future leaders need to master this language so that our country is able to compete globally. Thus, in order for a country to compete with other countries of the new developed technologies, a country must ensure that the people of the country are able to get access to the latest information with an instance. Therefore, mastering the most widely used language which is at the moment English is essential.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar also shared the same view on the importance of learning English. In his speech during the launching of English Language month at University Utara Malaysia (UUM), (2003) he emphasised on being competent in the English language. He also added that in this Information Age the need to get access to the latest information is fundamental. Furthermore, the latest information or

knowledge is mostly found written in English. If we wait for this information to be translated to our language, the country will end up lagging behind.

Being able to use the language for communication also plays an important role in gaining information and knowledge. Among the four skills namely listening, writing, reading and speaking, people usually judge our mastery of the language in the speaking aspect. This skill is the first skill that we acquire in our first language. Therefore, not only must we master the written language but also the spoken language. We need to interact with people from other countries who have different languages from us. As the status of English language being the language most widely used, it is therefore essential to master the speaking skills to be use for communication.

Mastering English language is indeed crucial for people in acquiring wider and global knowledge. In addition, English Language is very useful in the field of science and technology and it would be beneficial to our country, which is trying to achieve the Vision 2020 that is to turn the nation into an industrialization country.

1.2 Background of the Study

The present situation in Malaysia is that English is the second official language of the country after *Bahasa Melayu* which is the National Language. Although the status of English in the country is only as a second language, being proficient in the target language would provide one with a better future. Asmah Hj. Omar (2003) noted that having a certificate from the English school promised jobs in the government and in the private sector, and most of all it opened the path to higher education.

In general, the level of English language proficiency among students in Malaysia is declining particularly in the rural or remote areas. English is becoming a foreign language, in other word, more or less like an 'alien' language due to insufficient exposure and actual use of the target language in their daily life. When the status of English language in the Malaysian Education System was change to second language, which was formerly the medium of instruction in schools. It has affected the standard of English

tremendously due to the reduction of contact hours in exposure of the language and in actual use of the language (Habibah Salleh, 1979). English is taught only as one of the subjects in the school curriculum. It is not surprising that this scenario is still happening even today particularly in the rural areas where English is viewed only as a subject and not as a useful tool for communication or acquiring knowledge.

In Malaysia the English Language is formally known as the second language of the people. English language can also be said as the first language of some Malaysians people due to their awareness that English plays a crucial role as an international language of communication. McKay (2002) points out that the widespread use of English in a variety of political and intellectual areas make it imperative for any country wishing to access the global community for economic development to have access to it. They observe that it is the key to the nation's ability in being globally competitive since it is also the language of international trade, commerce, science and technology. Thus, having a firm grasp of the language means better employment opportunities, greater advantage for higher education and easier to keep up with the latest happenings in the world. Realizing this, students from privileged backgrounds especially in urban schools are primarily more enthusiastic and motivated to learn English. These students also use the language readily with the intention of uplifting their socioeconomic status. Unfortunately, for students who settle in the rural areas, their level of English language proficiency is declining tremendously. In a study conducted by Rosli Talif and Malachi Edwin (1990) on a comparative study of the achievement and the proficiency levels in English as a second language among learners in rural and urban schools in Peninsular Malaysia, their findings indicated that English proficiency of students in the urban areas were at a higher level compared to students in the rural areas. Students from these rural areas were exposed to virtually no English except for language lessons in schools, thus they cannot see the significance of mastering the target language. Most students generally adopt an indifferent attitude towards the language. They are usually disinterested in any program associated with English be it in the academic or entertainment perspective. They are unable to use the language effectively for communication.

Recently, the Malaysian Education Ministry has made an effort at encouraging the usage and giving more contact hours of the English language to the learners by introducing Science and Mathematic subjects in English medium and also another additional subject, English for Science and Technologies which is an elective subject for Form Four and Form Five. This move by the Ministry of Education has made positive impact for learners to get more contact hours with the target language. Nevertheless, English language is still drastically declining in the rural areas. English can only be said as the people's second language in the cities or urban areas, whereas, people or learners in the rural areas are way behind with these rapid developments. English language is still viewed as a foreign language by learners in rural areas. The target language is not seen as an important tool for communication or accessing knowledge. Furthermore, the people or learners never use the target language in their daily conversation or for communication purposes. Learners will only get in touch or exposure to the language during their English class which is less than three hours weekly. For these learners English lessons begin and conclude in school. This has become a contributing factor that affects rural learners' mastery of all the four skills in particular speaking skills of the target language.

In the speech delivered by the Minister of Education, Dato' Hishammuddin Tun Hussien (2004), he stated that the Ministry of Education are well informed of the decline of the English language among students, either in the school level or the tertiary level. Lack of mastery of English particularly for communication is also the main reason for unemployment among graduates. The public sector also arrested that many local graduates had failed to secure jobs because of their lack of competence in the English language, evident particularly during interviews. This lack of proficient was seen as contributing to graduate unemployment in 2002 some 44,000 were unemployed (Lee, 2004). This has led the Education Ministry to implement MUET (Malaysian University English Test) which is a public examination for students in Form six and in the university. The MUET is seen as providing the essential continuity in the exposure and use of English for students leaving the general school system. In other words, students who aspired to further their studies would sit the MUET in order to qualify for entry to local tertiary

institution. This gave the impetus for English to play a bigger role in the national education system, even though the MUET is limited to the promotion of general academic purpose.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Malaysian University English Test or MUET is a compulsory paper to be taken as one of the university requirements for students to graduate for their Bachelor degree. For Form six students, it is a yardstick for determining their entry in the university. It was first introduced in 2003 to cater students' English language needs in the university.

MUET exam consists of four papers of separated skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. In this study the main focus of the researcher will be the speaking skill. In the MUET Speaking Test the task is divided into two sections. In Task A, candidates are tested on speaking individually whereas; for Task B students are required to participate actively in a ten minutes group discussion based on a task given. Usually there are four students in a group discussion and they are tested on their ability to interact and taking turns, to negotiate meaning, to manage discussion and to conclude the discussion. Most candidates are able to give their ideas orally for Task A. For Task B many low proficiency candidates fail to participate actively in the discussion. According to Josephine Lourdunathan and Sujatha Menon (2005) in their study on interaction strategy training, it was found that the inability to play an effective role in the group discussion is due not only to a lack of vocabulary but also lack of effective interaction strategies. In order to play an active role in group discussion, students first of all need to know how to interact and this requires interactive strategy training. Even if learners know the interaction strategies but they may not be able to use it efficiently during their interaction due to the structure which is in statement form. Therefore, training these learners specific technique which involve cooperation from all members of the group would be more meaningful to them.

MUET Speaking Test for Task B requires candidates to engage in a spontaneous group discussion. It is spontaneous because candidates will

only be given two minutes to prepare for their points. In two minutes time, candidates who are low proficiency will encounter problems preparing for their points in the target language due to their limited vocabulary. Usually these candidates will write their points in full sentences, instead of just the points itself. Therefore, when other members in the group are talking they will be busy writing their sentences and not paying any attention to the ongoing conversation. The scenario that teachers usually encounter during students discussion is their discussion is usually short with unorganized responses and does not relate to what the previous speaker is saying. It is not surprising if there are long silences or pauses between speeches among the group members during the discussion. There are times when some group members are unable to reply or respond back to their friend's statements and this leads to communication breakdown among the members in the group. Each member in the group tries to give their own opinion and point, but they are unable to link their ideas together and come to a conclusion. So it would look as if they are having their own dialogue and not a group discussion.

Form six students in the rural areas such as Kunak District, face difficulties mastering the four skills, and speaking skill is the weakest of all the skills. Most of the students are low proficiency in English and are unable to engage in a conversation in English since learners are lacking of vocabulary and conversational skills. Learners have not mastered the basic speaking skill in holding a conversation or discussion. Lim (1994) conducted a research on fluency and accuracy in spoken English through a survey using questionnaires among EFL in-service teachers. It revealed that the respondents who taught at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels agreed that their learners were not able to speak English well and that speaking is the weakest skill among the four language skills. Lacking of exposure and practice in using the target language are some of the major barriers for learners to master the language which eventually discourage them to learn the language. Learners do not see any special reason to learn or use the target language because they already have their first language for communication purposes.

When it comes to language input, both teachers and students in a non-English-speaking environment have no opportunity of being exposed to the real language in natural setting. This lack of exposure and practice using the language orally lead learners to lacking of strategies in conducting conversation of the target language. Antonia Chandrasegaran (1979), in a study among Malay-medium learners in Johor, noticed a definite link between a degree of exposure of English and competence in the language. She found that urban pupils tend to be better in English than rural pupils. The possibility was that urban pupils, by living in an environment where the opportunity for hearing and reading English was more readily available, experienced wider contact with English and so become more competent in the language. Learners are unable to master the conversational skills because they have never been exposed to the real setting of how the target language functions in a real situation. Speaking activities in the class are usually done by referring to dialogues from textbooks which are well structured sentences and without any grammatical errors. This would give learners the impression that when engaging in a conversation there should not be any grammatical errors, false start or repetition done. This hinders learners to practice using the language due to the fact that they are afraid of making mistakes. Furthermore, the lack of speech training may make them hesitate to start a conversation. In addition, under the limitation of their English competence, even if they have their own ideas it is not easy for them to express those ideas in the target language, let alone negotiate meanings with others. Second language learners often seek individual identity and self-esteem which sometimes make them shy and embarrassed when making mistakes. As a result, they tend to keep quiet rather than take risk. This factor contributes greatly in their mastery of the conversational skills of the target language.

Learners are unable to engage in a smooth flow of conversation or discussion due to their lack of awareness of the nature of turn-taking in English conversation. Hudson (1980) explains that one of the kinds of structure in speech is based on the fact that people take turns in most kind of interaction, so that speech is divided up into separate stretches spoken by different speakers. Learners are unaware that mastering the skills of turn-

taking is vital where they could identify the indicator when different speaker will take their turn. Turn-taking in conversation is a very highly skilled activity therefore, if learners are able to have firm grasp of this skills they are able to easily join in a conversation or discussion. Allwright (1980) commented on how students of English as a second language failed to use appropriate turn-taking signals in their interactions with each other and with the teacher. Turn-taking is another of those culturally oriented sets of rules that require finely tuned perceptions in order to communicate effectively. Learner's awareness of the technique in turn-taking might determine a smoother flow of discussion or conversation among these low proficiency learners. Second language learners, particularly in the remote areas in Sabah, have always had difficulties when it comes to group discussion task. Learners are unable to decide who speaks first or when to join the discussion. Most of them also have problems starting and concluding their discussion, expressing their agreement or disagreement. Some students just sit quietly and give short responses that are not relevant to the on-going discussion or conversation. Due to the short, little and irrelevant response given during the speaking test, it has caused low scores in their MUET Speaking Test.

Another factor that hinders learners to master the target language is the environment surrounding them. There is no positive language environment that gives them the opportunity to master the language. Most of the people around them use their first language or their mother tongue in their daily conversation and when communicating among themselves. Learners do not have the opportunity to use the target language in communicating with their peers or other people around them which leads them in lacking of practice using the language. When these learners have already acquired their first language for communicating with other people they will not bother to learn other language. They view this language not as a useful tool for their communication, after all language is meant for communication. Their environment is one of the many factors contributing to their failure in mastering the speaking skills in the target language. They do not have anyone around them that can be their role model except their English teacher in school. Thus, they never practice using the language in their daily life. As believed by many linguists, the only way a person can

really master a language is through the exposure and the practice of the language. The more practice and exposure with the help of good technique use of the learners, the better they will perform in the target language.

1.4 Rationale of the Study

Since MUET was first introduced a few pieces of research on strategy training for small group interaction were conducted to learners in universities such as studies conducted by Josephine Lourdunathan and Sujatha Menon in 2005. There has been hardly any research conducted with low proficiency learners in remote areas. Moreover, most of the research is only focusing on training selected interaction strategy which may not be applicable to learners in the remote area and there was no technique introduced.

This study was also conducted to find out whether through the use of adjacency pairs low proficiency learners are able to identify the end of someone's turn. Adjacency pairs are pair utterances and learners are familiar with this technique in their first language. They know that when a question is asked, an answer is required by other speakers. In contrast with the statement form, these learners fail to identify the end of someone's turn because of their limited mastery of the target language. Hence, this technique will facilitate low proficiency learners to identify the changes of speaker.

The use of adjacency pairs would also enable low proficiency learners to provide relevant response to previous utterance. Furthermore, adjacency pairs are two pair of utterances that are related to each other. A question would give the next speaker the clue of what the next utterance should be. This would help these learners link their ideas so that irrelevant responses among the group members could be avoided.

Adjacency pairs also assist learners to maintain their conversation or discussion. This will at the same time reduce silence or long pauses between speeches that lead to communication breakdown. When silence occurs during the discussion, posing a question might elicit ideas from other

members in the group. This technique would help these learners maintain their conversation.

1.5 Significance of the Study

Generally, it is assumed that low proficient learners are those who gave up learning the target language because of the difficulties they face in following the lesson in class particularly in their speaking class. Research into the classroom discourse (Coulthard, 1977; Sinclair and Brazil, 1982; Holmes, 1983) has shown that most exchanges happen in the classroom follow the “teacher initiates – pupil responds – teacher comments” sequence. Sinclair and Brazil’s (1982) research of teacher talk shows that students have very limited opportunities to participate in the language of the classroom and that the teacher dominates the talk in quantity, range and degree of control. As a result, learners are not trained to actually speak and use the language accordingly. Students learn the language only for instruction and not for conversation or discussion thus, they never learn or acquire the basic strategy and technique that is crucial for group interaction. For that reason this research is conducted to find out whether training the most needed strategy for interaction with explicit instruction of adjacency pairs (question-answer) as one of their techniques would improve their speaking skills for group interaction.

Form Six students are students who are still under the secondary schools system environment unlike the environment in universities. In school they only learn the theoretical part of life and are not really exposed to the real world. Hence, when they leave the school they face difficulties competing with those from the urban areas in terms of job opportunities as well as entrance to universities. It is not that they did not excel in other subjects but they did not perform well during the interview. They are unable to use the target language to communicate with the employer. Having good command of the English language opens up their opportunities to be employed. For that reason, it is important to train these learners’ with basic interaction strategies which will be useful for their future life. Training students of the most essential strategies in question and answer form would be a good start for low proficiency learners so that they can easily identify the

signal showing the change of speaker. This would encourage passive speakers to participate in the conversation because they are given the chance to take part. When question is posed an answer is expected from other members in the group. So there is a strong force to make them speak.

Adjacency pairs are two predictable utterances and can be a very useful technique in negotiating meanings in conversation. For low proficiency learners, it is very difficult for them to express their intended meanings because of their limited vocabulary in the English language. Therefore, pair utterances would be a very useful technique for them to clarify their intended meanings even though in short sentences. As we are well informed of, these learners will normally give short reply or keep silent due to their inability use the language to express their ideas. So by using question and answer it is hope that they can come to an agreement of their intended meanings. In addition, the pair utterances are usually the best technique in maintaining a conversation.

This study was conducted to give new insights to teachers of some useful technique at encouraging their weak students to participate in a conversation. Many second language teachers in the rural areas are facing problems with low proficient learners, who are at the same time reluctant to participate in conversation or discussion in the English Language. These learners are very familiar with adjacency pairs in their first language but they are unable to use it when using the English Language. Learners seem to forget how to use this technique which they have always used in their first language. Training explicitly of this technique may help learners to build their self-confidence and raising their awareness that a simple structure could give great contribution in group interaction and as their first step towards conversational proficiency.

The government of Malaysia has spent a lot of money to equip most schools with useful materials and equipment such as language laboratories, libraries, and computers, so that the standard of English Language in our country could be upgraded. However, the results of the public examinations show that students' performance in the English Language had not reached

the target that were aimed. In fact, the results were totally unsatisfactory. In order for a country to be competitive globally, mastering the widely used language is of utmost important. We need to find alternatives to force the new generation to master the target language particularly the spoken language. This small part of the study may contribute in upgrading the command of the spoken language in developing low proficient learners conversational proficiency.

1.6 Aim of Study

The aim of this study is to observe how interaction strategy training with explicit instruction of adjacency pairs might effect the development of conversational proficiency among low proficiency learners.

1.7 Objectives of the Study

- i) To find out the effectiveness of training interaction strategies with explicit instruction of adjacency pairs on learners task performance and communicative ability.
- ii) To identify how many and what type of interaction strategies trained will be used in their discussion.
- iii) To find out what type of interaction strategies will be effectively used in their discussion.

1.8 Research Questions

1. Will the treatment group perform better in task performance and communicative ability compared to the control group?
2. Is there a reduction in the pauses?