

Turning Miscommunication Events into Opportunities for Developing Interactional Competence

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ABSTRACT

Many studies have explored the *difficulties faced by foreign language learners when they begin the learning journey from survival to advanced level. Most of these investigations, however, tend to focus on what makes the road to fluency strewn with obstacles and challenges; no significant attention has been paid to what makes the journey successful. This paper analyzes the discursive strategies that advanced learners of English use to turn miscommunication events into opportunities to further develop their ability to negotiate meaning and manage interactions. It explores some of the strategies and resources that the research participants in the study use to signal, prevent and repair misunderstanding. In other words, this paper pays attention to communication successes rather than failures.*

The methodology employed here is ethnographic, and the theoretical framework derives from interactional sociolinguistics which takes a socially- and contextually-oriented approach to the study of language. The principal method used to collect data was participant observation with audio recording, combined with serendipitous interviews and focus group discussions. The research participants were teachers and students of an employment preparation program for immigrants to Canada. The study took place over 12 weeks from September to November 2009 at a community college in a western Canadian province.

The central argument this paper advances is that language learning at the advanced level is developed through the active practice of negotiating meaning, repairing misunderstanding, and collaboration. Pedagogically, language teachers could benefit from being familiar with the basic tools of discourse analysis to gain insights into the management of talk-in-interaction.

Keywords: Miscommunication, classroom discourse, English as a lingua franca