Ethnography of Communication Analysis of Ph.d Students' on-Line Group Discussion

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Abstract: On the basis of Hymes' theory of SPEAKING model, the paper researches into the speaking model of Chinese Ph.D student's on-line group study under the Philippines' university. The paper aims to seek out the features of Chinese Ph.D students' on-line peer group discussion on paper writing from the perspective of ethnography of communication.

1. Introduction

Sociolinguists believe that study of language must consider social context, in which the social variables of a speech event, such as gender, age, status, cultural and social background, need to observed(Spolsky, 1998). Unlike written discourse, the study of natural chunks of spoken language was generally ignored by linguist because of natural occurring speech is spontaneous and hard to observe. Hymes(1964) proposed the approach "ethnography of communication" to combine linguistics, sociology, ethnology to investigate communicative habits in a community as a whole. And in 1972, Hymes(1972)further developed the SPEAKING model in analyzing the specific speech events. The ethnography of communication is an approach to the research of cultural behavior of speech events(Carbough, 1989). Since EC is a descriptive science of language(Hymes, 1974), it can help to examine and how language used in a real speech community among different social groups(Saville-Troike, 2003).

Many researchers have conducted researches of ethnography of communication into specific speech communities or speech events, such as child education, casual conversations in workplace and sermons. Duff(1995) and Potouski(2005) have studied immersion classroom and focused on the impact of sociopolitical system and Rezenda (2012) also shifted focus on children's oral presentation competence in classroom. Besides classroom communication, some social life are also observed. Ojha & Holmes(2010) has observed humor as a way of communication in Midwest United States workplace. Horing(2010) has explored how a Jewish sermon achieve negative and positive responses in the perspective of EC. Ray& Biswas(2011) have focused on the the academic folk of a department in an Indian University to test Hymes' model.

From the previous studies concerning EC, there seems to be a gap in researches in academic speech communities under Chinese cultural background. Ph. D students need to do a lot of academic researches and they would often discuss together on some academic chores, such as selecting research topic, preparing presentations of research topics and exchanging and discussing

ideas. The study attempts to fill in the lacuna by focusing on Chinese Ph.D students' on-line peer group discussion on paper writing from the perspective of ethnography of communication. This paper also tries to explore the academic rituals among Chinese Ph.D students.

2. Research Questions

This paper aims to observe one recorded on-line group discussion of Chinese Ph.D students from De La Salle University - Dasmarinas(DLSU-D) on paper writing. Likewise, it investigates the elements of ethnography in the peer group academic discussions and reveals the social and academic rituals in the presentation of results and discussion on the basis of Hymes SPEAKING model(1972). Specifically, it attempts to answer the following questions:
    1). What are the elements of EC in the academic speech community?
    2). What are the communicative competence observed in the academic speech community?

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Ethnography of Communication

The study will employ the theory of ethnography of communication proposed by Hymes(1964) and Hymes' (1972) theory of SPEAKING model. Hymes(1964) launched a new integrated discipline, focusing on the study of patterns of communicative behavior as it constitutes one of the cultural systems ,as it functions in the overall context of culture, and as it is related to other patterns that make up the system(Saville-Troike, 2003). The ethnography of communication focuses on interpret how the communication events proceed within the speech community in specific cultural settings(Saville-Troike, 2003). As for speech community, Hymes has defined it as "a community sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech, and rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety" (Hymes, 1972: 54). Within the speech community, specific speech events would be detected on its components of speech(Hymes, 1972). In order to make the set of the components convenient, Hymes(1972) has come up with the use of SPEAKING model to the ethnography of communication:
    S-Setting and Scene. Setting refers to the time and place of a speech act to physical circumstances and scene refers to what kind of speech event is taking place according to cultural definitions(Hymes, 1972: 60).
    P-Participants. Participants includes not only the speaker and the addressee, but also the addressor and the audience(Hymes, 1972).
    E-Ends. Ends can be divided into outcomes(the purpose of the event from a cultural point of view) and goals(the purposes of the individual participants)(Hymes, 1972).
    A-Act sequence. Act sequence consists of both message form (how something is said) and content (what is said)(Hymes, 1972).
    K-Key. Key refers to the manner or spirit in which a speech act is carried out, e.g., whether it is mock or serious, perfunctory or painstaking(Hymes, 1972).
    I -Instrumentalities. I includes both channels and forms of speech. Channel means the way a message travels from one person to another. Forms of speech refers to languages and their subdivisions, dialects, codes, varieties, and registers.(Hymes, 1972)
    N-Norms of interaction. This component distinguishes the two senses of norms that may be relevant to a communication practice: what is done normally as a matter of habit, and what is the appropriate thing to do(Hymes, 1972).
    G-Genres. G refers to categories like poems, myths, proverbs, lectures, and commercial messages(Hymes, 1972).

3.2 Communicative Competence

One of the theoretical goal of sociolinguistic investigation is the notion of communicative competence: a speaker's integrated knowledge about how to communicate effectively in social-cultural settings (Hymes, 1972). Speaker's communicative competence can determine speech performance, such as the way of speaking and the message conveyed (Hymes, 1972), which involves more than just grammatical skills(Dundes, et.al, 1972). People would choose different language to speak properly in some certain social context. Paltridge (2000) pointed out that communicative competence refers to both a speaker's linguistic knowledge and social knowledge on how to perform properly during communication.

4. Methodology

The presents study adopts methodology of observation. Observation is an essential tool for analyzing and interpreting discourse study in ethnography of communication (Kothari, 2010), especially in dynamic communicative events. The study observes two recorded Chinese Ph.D students' MS Teams group discussion, which centered on academic discussion on choosing research topics and allotting the paper writing. The data was chosen for its unique situations: most of the Ph.D students participated haven't met each other face-to-face; although they have worked in colleges or universities, only two of them have been teaching English since graduation; they comes from different Provinces of China. The recording lasts for one hour. After observation, the key stages of the discussion are classified based on my intuitive academic knowledge and major components of speech are documented for further analysis.

After observation and documentation, the study applies the SPEAKING model mentioned above to sociolinguistic study. It help to make a descriptive and analytical research to illustrate how language is used in this speech event by the specific community. The specific components of speech events are to be interpreted and the their functions are to be analyzed. Besides, the social and academic rituals reflected in the speech community are to be revealed.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Results

5.1.1 Ethnographic Analysis Based on Hymes' Speaking Model

The recorded on-line group discussion was held on MS Teams among four Chinese Ph.D students from DLSU-D. To relieve the pressure of paper writing, one male student proposed to form an academic group to discuss some academic problems on-line once a week, since they are situated in different places in China. The general situations of the four participants are presented in the Table 1:

Table 1 the Social Profile of the Four Participants.

Participants	Age	Sex	Present occupation	Location
P1	30	M	Administrative faculty	Hubei Province, China
P2	40	F	Full-time teacher	Anhui Province, China
P3	31	F	Full-time teacher	Xinjiang Province, China
P4	30	F	Full-time teacher	Shandong Province, China

The on-line meeting lasted for one hour, and the agenda are roughly listed as below:
1) Self-introduction on personal situation;
2) Sharing personal research interests and recent research plan;

3) Allocation of further paper writing plan.

Here are the analysis of the on-line communication based on the SPEAKING model.

Setting and Scene: The setting is the Ph.D peer academic discussion held on MS Teams on Jun.26 through their self-made channel.

Participants: There are four Chinese Ph.D students from CLAC of DLSU-D

Ends: The group gathered to discuss some academic problems that had hindered them in paper writing. And they aimed to help each other solve the academic problems.

Act: In order to illustrate the academic affairs clearly, the participants present their research interest and research plan with the aid of shared screen on MS Team. And they generally exchanged their academic problems and concerns.

Key: The scheduled agenda go smoothly in a friendly and cooperative atmosphere. And the communicative speech is more formal in discussing academic affairs.

Instrument: The participants present their ideas in turn and they spontaneously use mandarin Chinese to exchange for they come from different places in China.

Norm: Since this is a peer group academic discussion, the participants obeyed the basic norms among Chinese students. For example, Chinese student will tentatively show disapproval towards other group members to show necessary respects and they would try to save others' face without confronting them. Generally, they would maintain the defaults carefully.

Genres: Three of the participants are female teachers. The words they have chosen are rather formal and they tried to make their presentation substantial.

5.1.2 Analysis of Communicative Competence

Through the ethnographic analysis of the recorded academic discussion, we can identify clearly the ethnographic elements in this oral academic event. From observation, the on-line discussion have achieved their intended communicative competence(Hymes, 1972), namely, they have effectively communicate with their peer Chinese Ph.D students on-line. The integrated interpretation of ethnography of communication can account for how the social variables affect the oral academic events.

Since the setting is a formal academic discussion on paper writing and the participants are Chinese Ph.D students who are studying in the university for Ph.D degree, they were cooperative and friendly during discussion. The group leader is the male student, who starts the discussion by self-introduction and brief the general agenda of the meeting. Then he finished his part by inviting anther participant. And other participants presented themselves in turn. The procedure went smoothly under their common social and academic rituals. They are middle-aged teachers and they respect each other with politeness and obey the cooperative rules. This can be reflected from their ways of showing disagreement. When the group leader allotted the assignment of the next-stage paper writing. The other participants fell into silence for various reasons. Later, one female participant suggested that they can meet weekly as proposed by the group leader but also make it clear that they would try but cannot ensure that they can finish their assigned job. Such ways of speaking will keep the friendly and cooperative atmosphere and also express their difficulties which will be more acceptable. That is the norms they obeyed, and that also decides their genres of the communication are formal and polite. Moreover, they chose mandarin Chinese to exchange to enhance the comprehensibility among participants. Another finding is that in this speech community, equality and diversity can be observed among participants. All the participants presented their ideas and discussed with each other equally. At the same time, individual opinions are also accepted and left for further discussion.

5.2 Discussion

As presented in the previous ethnographic analysis, the present study clearly examines the ethnography of communication and presents the importance of EC in analyzing communicative behavior in a real context. The integral interpretation of the academic group discussion can explain fully how social variables of the speech community affect their communication events. Besides, the social and academic rituals implied in the speech event are revealed. It manifests the current principles of politeness and academic rituals among Chinese young and middle-aged well-educated people. Among them, men show more respect for women. Social status has little influence on their speech acts. In face of the academic rituals, social background and status are dwarfed. The person who had better academic performance received more respect and attention regardless of their gender and occupation. However, in other speech situations, such equality will not easily be found, just as Ray, M.& Biswas, C.' (2011) study showed that social status and occupation status have influence on mode of speaking in a staff meeting in an Indian university.

The possible reasons for such equality and politeness observed in academic group discussion lie in the following two factors. Firstly, the participants are attending an informal on-line meeting and their ends are commonly shared. This is a meeting with practical aims to remove the difficulties hindering their paper writing. So they need to respect each other as far as possible and keep necessary politeness to make the meeting go smoothly. Moreover, the distance and unfamiliarity among members make them speak with mandarin Chinese and formal sentences to improve the efficiency of communication. In dealing with disagreement, all the participants show more compromised and cooperative spirit.

In brief, this study provides sound evidence that Hymes' model is an interpretative and analytic framework of analyzing communicative events from the ethnography perspective. The functions of the social variables can be well illustrated in a real social context. It provides a glimpse of academic meeting of Chinese Ph.D students who study in DLSU-D. It reveals the ethnographic features in their academic speech events. However, one limitation of this study is the data chosen is rather small. More data of the same type of group discussion is required to make a more convincing results. Another limitation is that the participants in the recorded meeting is only four, which is rather small. Thus, the future study may cover these limitations. However, more relevant researches may be further carried out to enrich the ethnographic study on Chinese academic groups.

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