CROSS-CULTURE COMMUNICATION: LINGUISTIC AND NONVERBAL ACCOMMODATION

WITHIN AN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.

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Abstract

Immigration to the United States presents difficulties to culturally diverse communities because of various customs, beliefs and languages. Daily social interaction and differing behavioral norms in these communities harbor positive and negative interethnic interactions. English as a second language (ESL) classrooms are common places in which people of numerous nationalities meet and work. The goal of this ethnography study is to observe the students’ and teachers’ interactions within an ESL classroom aided by Howard Giles’s communication accommodation theory (CAT) as a lens through which to view these issues. The communication interaction patterns and themes are divided into groups based on CAT’s inherent categories of converging (adopting a similar style), diverging (adopting a different style), or maintaining (non-accommodation of different styles) linguistic and nonverbal features. By drawing on these observations, ESL instructors can scrutinize and enhance their own classroom lectures to not only teach English, but also to raise cultural awareness and help reduce prejudice and undeserved preconceptions of other ethnicities. The findings show strong convergence by the students to teacher speech pauses and hand gesture explanation. Non-accommodation’s strongest example dealt with native language usage in the classroom, as advanced ESL students depended on English much more than the beginners.
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Chapter One: Introduction

The Problem and Goal

Within the framework of everyday life, people encounter various social groups and culture. In a diverse culture like that of the United States, which is full of globally relocated immigrants, intercultural interactions and communication are inevitable. Many facets define each culture, from the more obvious language and traditional attire to the more obscure behavioral mannerisms, and situational norms. Many of these characteristics overlap between differing groups, positively connecting some, while dividing others into perpetually negative interethnic relations (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2009). Of these characteristics, language is a very obvious and often-used culture-defining feature. People use language to support in-group solidary between members and to enhance or solidify their own standing within it (Simard, Taylor, & Giles, 1976). Germany has a “high” form of German, which is spoken in the media, government and any streamlined situations (Ender & Straßl, 2009). But each region’s dialects, including that of neighboring Switzerland, are so different that the language is almost unrecognizable from area to area (Christen, 1998). English speakers, on the other hand, deal with great differences in accent patterns, both intra- and internationally.

An increasing number of the Hispanic population in the United States of America due to immigration and birthrate is one of many signs that the intercultural communication interactions will only become more prevalent in the future. From 2000 to 2010 the Latino population increased 10%, and now more than 16% of the US population claims to be Hispanic or Latino descent (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, & Albert, 2011). But because they are still
greatly in the minority, Latinos, as the subgroup, are widely expected to assimilate to the local majority by learning English and integrating to the local traditions and way of life (Sachdev & Giles, 2004; Simard, Taylor, & Giles, 1976). There are many ways to learn a new language. Some prefer assimilation by learning from surroundings. Others take formal and structured classes, such as English as a second language (ESL) in the U.S., specifically. I am interested in how minorities who voluntarily take structured ESL classes interact with their teachers. For my thesis, I will complete an ethnographic study of an ESL classroom, observing the interactions between U.S. American teachers and adult immigrant students within the classroom setting.

**Framing**

I will frame my research using the Howard Giles’s communication accommodation theory (CAT). This theory “suggests that people convey attitudes and establish social distance by converging (adopting a similar style), diverging (adopting a different style), or maintaining linguistic (language, speech rate, accent), paralinguistic (pauses, utterance length) and nonverbal (eye movement, smiling, gazing) features” (Marlow & Giles, 2008, p. 55). When foreigners enter a new environment, they, as subordinates, are expected to converge and adapt to the local standard (Giles, 2008; Kim, 2001). This convergence, or adopting of another style, can trigger many psychological effects. For instance, those who adapt may find increased opportunity, like job access, but the benefits are frequently accompanied by identity confusion and in-group alienation (Marlow & Giles, 2008).

The maintaining, or non-accommodation, feature of CAT explains why certain dialects and local accents are valued and preserved by the people who speak them (Giles,
2008). From the more aggressive Boston and New York “northerner” accents to the more relaxed, twanged Appalachian “southern” draw, English contains seemingly countless accents. As groups of people with the same social identities find themselves in a different environment, they regularly accentuate these linguistic differences to demonstrate group solidarity (Giles & Johnson, 1981). These in-groups speak with thicker accents and use more colloquialisms than if they were in their natural surroundings. A problem, though, is during these heightened situations of group solidarity, the foreign in-groups may inadvertently offend the local party. By strengthening their own comfort, the outsiders give the perception that they refuse to adapt or that the local culture is not worth acclimation (Giles & Dorjee, 2004).

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

The subsequent chapters of this study outline the previous literature and information framing this ethnographic observation. The methodology will explain the many facets of how the research was formed and why. In this study, I will research and observe interactions and document the various distinct interactions patterns of teachers and students in an ESL classroom and divide them into themes through the structuring lens of CAT categories- convergence, divergence, and maintaining. I will describe in-depth the environment in which they hold these classes, as well as the hierarchy of the educational system they utilize. I also used still images and interviews in order to strengthen my findings and research. The images helped to recreate classroom diagrams of the ESL classroom environments and to allow further documentation and detailing of the surroundings. The interviews given by the two teachers – an advanced instructor and a
beginning-level instructor – provided insight to why certain phenomena played out particular ways within the classroom.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Theoretical Basis

This chapter will survey various empirical findings related to multicultural interactions in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. I chose to use Howard Giles’ communication accommodation theory (CAT) to frame the previous research and ethnographic fieldwork of ESL classrooms and the interactions that take place within them. CAT implies that people linguistically express their feelings of their own comfort in social situations by adopting a similar style, different style, maintaining the norm and using pausing or stuttering, and other nonverbal traits (Marlow & Giles, 2008). Giles (2008) divides these actions into the structure of convergence, or accommodation, divergence, or under-accommodation, and maintaining, or non-accommodation. Convergence happens when people want to accommodate to another person or group of people with which they are communicating. A good example of this is when immigrants relocate to another country, they are “expected to converge to the dominant language” (Marlow & Giles, 2008, p. 55). Those who adopt language norms may access opportunity, but they will most likely also feel cultural identity confusion as well as alienation from their original in-group. Individuals diverge speech patterns to enhance their own group solidarity and to elevate their ethnic esteem (Marlow & Giles, 2008). Non-accommodation, similarly, can alienate other cultural groups, but people primarily maintain linguistic patterns when the language forms define a particular social identity (Giles, 2008). The dynamics of non-accommodation
are “particularly potent in multilingual contexts. It may not be so much the case that immigrants are ‘failing’ to learn a host or dominant-group language as they are successfully maintaining their own valued ethnolinguistic identities” (Giles, 2008, p. 124). This theory does not attempt to determine why these forms of accommodation happen; rather, it frames the occurrences and gives structure to the reality of the studied environment. This theory will help contextualize the dynamics of the multicultural interactions in an ESL classroom between the Caucasian male ESL teachers and his multiple students of various ethnic backgrounds. These backgrounds range from that of learners who are traditionally more individualistic and keep a certain social distance to other learners who come from more traditionally familiar and group-centered backgrounds.

The studied methods and interactions I will review later on include content, student needs, native language use, and purposeful interactions, which will be discussed in greater length below. These pedagogical and cultural issues have largely been studied by ethnographic research and teacher field experience and reflections. My ethnographic research will incorporate these issues with a focus on the ESL instructors and their interactions toward their diverse field of students.

**Philosophical Assumption**

Across cultures and nationalities, humans are social beings. Just as relationship interaction levels vary, so, too, do cultures in the forms of traditions, customs and social norms. People from most countries of the world have similar general characteristics that set them apart and help them identify to that country, or larger world region. For instance, Latinos from Mexico to Argentina usually have dark brown hair, brown eyes and light
brown skin. People recognize native Africans by their dark brown skin, black hair and brown eyes. Many Asians have fair skinned, smaller-framed bodies with straight black hair, although people from Asian island nations like Cambodia tend to have darker skin. Individual countries and other subgroups have even more distinct characteristics. These similar subgroups by and large share and submit to the same traditions and religions, which cuts down on the amount of social conflict brought about by differing views. But in the U.S., it is different. The majority of residents are Caucasian. With the ever-increasing numbers of immigrants starting in the country’s first days centuries ago, U.S. residents can only expect to see an exponentially increasing Latino population, among others, and a subsequent larger mix of culture and language (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, & Albert, 2011).

Because relationships and interactions are so crucial to humans, the increasing amount of cultures will naturally produce many situations with social and cultural dissonance, not only because of the cultures, but also because of the language barriers. Not only do immigrants regularly speak entirely different languages, but importance of social cues also differ between cultures. Therefore, in accordance with Jürgen Habermas’s Discourse Theory, depending on the type of discourse and whether it is moral, ethical or rhetorical in nature, several different cultures may provide inherently different opinions on the debates and viewpoints (Bohman & Rehg, 2011). ESL programs provide safe places for immigrants to learn the native language of their new home. The more progressive programs also offer English sociolinguistic awareness for workplace inference understanding as well as national and civic discourse for immigrant and outsider understanding. As an observer, I can regard discourse as reasonable only if my scrutiny of the process does not “uncover obvious exclusions, suppression of arguments, manipulation,
self-deception, and the like” (Bohman & Rehg, 2011). This study assumes that intercultural shock and social dissonance are inevitable because of the natural makeup of the United States of America. This ethnographic study intends to provide understanding and insight to the sustentation of classroom and social harmony despite growing numbers of multicultural interaction.

**Language Learning through Purposeful Social Interactions**

A common teaching belief is that the more exposure and practice students have to target material, the better chance those students have of understanding retaining said material. As with any other teaching capacity, ESL instructors also strive to provide a rich language environment of multiple sensory objects – reading, writing, hearing, and speaking – are widely accepted as the ideal for second language learning. “These classrooms recognize that language development, whether in a first or a second language, occurs in social contexts and through purposeful social interactions” (Bauer & Manyak, 2008, p. 176). Just as toddlers learn their first language over time through many mistakes, usually with primarily parents or guardians, so too, do adults with their second language. Teachers need to be aware that a straightforward common classroom is not what students need in this situation to learn the new language. Memorization and testing of target language vocabulary is obviously needed, but can in no way be the main point of the lessons (Ernst & Richard, 1994). In this sense, teachers need to put their students into situations where they take those tested vocabulary words and form meaningful phrases with them. The more self-reliant the students are, the more real the situation becomes. Teachers would actually not be a large part of this process, only encouraging autonomy in ESL speaking students by
putting themselves in meaning-making situations. This would require other people who speak none of the learner’s language or situation, so as to not be able to help or be overly patient. It would also encourage colleagues and fellow ESL-learners to become as competent as possible as soon as possible in order to promote and encourage information sharing. These interactions can happen almost anywhere outside the classroom. The teacher can also prompt these interactions with guests, invited to the classroom to intermingle with the students and create meaningful, unrehearsed dialogue.

Types of interaction also play a large role in the language and meaning-making process. Although conversational competence may be the goal for many ESL learners, various teachers deliberately avoid the practice because of the natural difficulty. Says one inner city ESL teacher:

It turns you off from wanting to start any group discussion for fear of standing up there going, ‘all right, somebody say something.’ I think that’s where I notice I’ve changed as a teacher from my previous school, where I’d get discussions going, and it would be really fun. Here, I do more of just avoiding the whole issue, although discussion is something that probably should be practised more. It’s because it’s like pulling teeth. (Wiltse, 2006, p. 207)

The teacher understood the importance and value of classroom conversation, but failed to find a way to nurture it. She aimed for discussion as opposed to simply recitation, but she admitted she “talked too much’ when the students did not respond to her questions” (p. 210). Another interaction form, face-to-face interaction may be the most stressful of all interactional situations, but they are the best for language learning and adaptation for
mentally molding word meaning (Caputo, Hazel, McMahon, & Darnels, 2002). This pushes the learner to experience and accept the word’s meaning to the speaker and adding that perception to the learner’s own shape of the word, furthering the understanding and clarity of the new term. Forcing learners into difficult interaction situations – for instance, real-time translating – would further the learning process in various ways. Translating exercises would be a practical learning experience where students gauge their own skills (Vacca-Rizopoulos & Nicoletti, 2009). From this point, students can easily self-evaluate deficiencies and areas in which they need more guidance and correction.

**Discourse Content and Student Needs**

The subject matter of dialogue in ESL communities can affect the way immigrants view themselves and their social group. The divides happen various ways, from social class levels, nationalities, ages and even gender (Jacobson, 2003; Wiltse, 2006; Wolfe, 2011; Yepez, 1994). Many teachers and researchers have found that males are given more attention and leeway in the classroom, and therefore, sometimes are allowed to bend the rules of classroom native language use (Wiltse, 2006; Yepez, 1994). Of these usually Cuacasian professors, some may unintentionally take advantage of power struggles, or positively reinforce negative racial subjectivities. Wolfe (2011) argues that:

> Discourse serves different interests, promoting particular power relationships and constructing a range of subject positions that individuals within the fields are required or allowed to take up...Thus the discourses out of which people speak and by which they are positioned come to feel very much part of their identity or sense of self. Particular discursive practices
Instructors also debate the ideal amount of the target language used in ESL classrooms. People who debate for either side about ideal native language usage say that certain “instructors argue that the target language should be used as close to 100% of the time as possible in adult ESL classes” (Huerta-Macias & Kephart, 2009, p. 87). Others like to find similarities between languages in order to draw more comfort from students who grow uneasy and self-conscious over publicly making mistakes in front of classmates (Vacca-Rizopoulos & Nicoletti, 2009). Understandably, pre-beginner and other novice-level learners cannot engage in complete English without pulling from their native language. Many times, classrooms are filled with various native languages – at times with 20 respected and spoken (Ernst & Richard, 1994). Those students who share a language can help each other if their own English comprehension is too low to understand and interact with the teacher. Some instructors like to take the native language and use it in dialogue, discussing societal differences between their native and American cultures (Jacobson, 2003). The classrooms that cultivate student creativity and encourage mistake-making to enhance understanding generally focus “on what second language learners have rather than on what they lack” (Ernst & Richard, 1994, p. 320). Other classes (Huerta-Macias & Kephart, 2009; Jacobson, 2003) intentionally incorporate native language to be sure that students fully grasp individual lesson-important content. In fact, Huerta-Macias and Kephart (2009) found that there is no evidence at all to support the belief that it is best to exclude all native language use in an ESL classroom. Successful and long-time ESL instructor Jacobson (2003) teaches primarily Haitian immigrants and has found the
students’ best learning happens when he learns enough of the Haitian Kreyól and French in order to better understand the students’ backgrounds and also to more precisely tailor lesson plans to student grammar needs.

Summary of the Literature

In today’s globalized economy and the ever-changing mix of culture and nationalities in the U.S., immigrants are furthering the demand of teaching the world’s unofficial global language, English. ESL classes for all ages and knowledge levels are in high demand. But the quest for language skills and other multicultural interactions will inevitably bring conflict between cultures. Giles (2008) through his communication accommodation theory contextualizes the behaviors of the foreigners within the ESL classroom and beyond. Whether they come together and adapt to each other or diverge from each other’s native habits can provide a setting for classroom and, possibly, societal understanding. This information can also be used for furthering research of teaching methodology in this setting. But with many current voids in the research and Giles’s theory, much stands to be gained and understood. With ethnographic classroom research, ESL instructors will be better able to adapt to student needs and customs. They will have better information about allowing classroom native language use, or better yet, strategies to incorporate native language in classroom discourse to encourage interaction and cultivate student comfort. Research can help shed light on how students interact with their Caucasian teachers compared to interactions with their fellow immigrant classmates. In what ways do students’ and teachers’ actions converge, diverge or maintain linguistic features (Giles, 2008; Marlow & Giles, 2008)? Do teachers tailor speech patterns differently
for students than speech of interactions with fellow teachers? This research will fill the gap of existing extent of literature on the topic of ESL classroom interactions through the lens communication accommodation theory.

Chapter Three: Scope and Methodology

Introduction

Many observations have studied inner-workings of an ESL classroom and other teaching methods, but classroom interaction has yet to be examined in great detail. Pedagogical and cultural learning are multifaceted and cannot be simply dissected by teaching methods and lessons, which is why the relational aspect is so important. ESL teachers need to know more than only how to teach; they need to know the student body because of its inherently diverse culture. They need to know when to be more engaging in one-on-one lessons and interactions, and how to act in other culture-specific situations that may arise. These are reasons why this study focuses on the multiple student and teacher interactions within an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom through Howard Giles’s (2008) Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT).

Context and Participants

The classroom environment described in this ethnographic study is in a medium-sized city in a rural area of the Southeast region of the United States. The adult education career center's ESL program serves a student body that is 30% Middle Eastern, 30% African, 26% Asian, 9% Latino, and 5% European. The career center is located just outside
the designated downtown business district. The school is government-funded and the classes are free for students. The classes were available five days per week.

This ESL program was chosen because of the teachers. They are both Caucasian males in their early 30s who had their schooling entirely in the United States and are from the local area. Their only language knowledge is English, with minimal-to-no secondary language knowledge base. One is married. The other is single. Neither have children.

The students’ knowledge of English varies from novice to near-fluency. Many are parts of groups that have communities – familial or simply cultural – outside of the classroom. They take ESL classes for many reasons, but mostly to get better employment opportunities. Some live in the U.S. and have opened international or culture-specific grocery stores, while others are visiting for extended periods with family and want to get better English training from and English-speaking teachers in their native country. No students were born and raised in the U.S.; all are immigrants, relocating within the past ten years.

**Research Design**

The methodology used in this research was ethnography. This qualitative research style depends greatly on fieldwork, where the investigator makes real-time observations of an ongoing event and describes, without evaluating, how others view themselves (Caputo, 1990). Although participation is a common observation style, I used a non-participant style and gained outsider perspective, while getting insider knowledge by way of student and teacher interviews. I continually compared field notes and data from observation in order
to identify themes. Once emerging themes were established, they were further documented throughout the process to gauge prominence.

I visited the ESL program every other day for a month, taking field notes, photographing and conducting interviews. I searched for themes within the classroom of organized speaking and nonverbal communication patterns of meaning and action (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). I focused on interaction speech patterns between the two teachers and their multi-cultural students, as well as teacher-teacher and student-student interactions. Using CAT, I focused on how students and teachers displayed attitudes and established social distance. CAT puts linguistic and nonverbal actions into groups of converging, diverging, or non-accommodation (Giles, 2008). This research focuses most closely on nonverbal and paralinguistic, which Marlow and Giles (2008) define as pauses, utterance length, eye movement, smiling and gazing, among others.

I also documented detailed classroom environment and surroundings and interaction hierarchy using diagrams and charts. Specifics included classroom arrangement of tables, chairs, computers, group work areas, and teacher positioning. Aesthetics, color arrangements and learning resources scattered around on walls and in bookshelves were also accounted for. I analyzed the categories of surroundings as well as linguistic patterns in order to construct interrelated themes and interaction relationships to find their cultural meanings for this particular setting.

**Ethical Considerations**

Both ESL instructors gave consent for classroom observation study and said I could have access to anything I wanted in relation to the study. No students objected. The adult
education career center was a public place, so not many other students may have been aware I was not a student. The teachers and students were all very professional and nothing unethical became an issue. When asked, none of the observation subjects asked for confidentiality.

I stayed cautiously objective in my interpretation and meaning. Knowing that complete objectivity is impossible, I used methods of prolonged observations and semi-structured interviews to gain personal knowledge and offset my subjectivities (Bresler, 1996). There may have been classroom phenomena I could not explain, so I was conservative in my data collection until I could meet with someone better acquainted and studied in classroom procedure. I never reduced classroom data and themes to simple variables without first consulting with a participant of the ESL classes (Bresler, 1996).

Chapter Four: Research and Findings

Introduction

In my observations of an adult-level English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, I wanted to adopt the participant-as-observer role because I did not want to be a catalyst for any irregular interaction patterns in the classroom, but I wanted to disclose to the students that they were being studied (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). For this study, disclosing my presence was the best way to gather information, rather than participating and eliciting unnatural reactions by the participants of the teachers and students. A problem of information gathering in this classroom as a complete participant, an observer who participates in activities without making other participants aware, would have been my level of English (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). The immigrant students would have quickly
realized I was a fake because of my lack of foreign accent. I wanted to take the “fly on the wall” approach and simply observe, trusting my presence would have minimal affect on how interactions played out in the ESL classroom environment. As I later found out, the definition of my role changed slightly, but not enough to compromise the integrity and authenticity of the classroom.

As an ethnography study, my job was to document and structure apparent themes of the interactions between participants in the stated environment; therefore, I felt that I should not participate. If I had been a part of the classroom culture, I would have been prompting participant behaviors that would have otherwise not existed. In the participant-as-observer role, by definition I was allowed to interact with the environment and involve myself with happenings in order to experience them, but always with the understanding that my observations would have been “more superficial than what could be experienced by a complete participant,” which is when the observed are unaware they are being studied (Baxter & Babbie, 2004, p. 308). I decided to keep my involvement peripheral so that I could observe and they would be aware of me, but I would have to discern documented interactions and themes as natural or prompted by my presence.

Upon my first meeting with the two ESL instructors of the school, we agreed that it would be best for me to sit at tables by myself at the back of the classroom. In both classrooms at these tables, I could observe all interactions while staying more observer than participant in order to keep my study as pure as possible. To the instructors’ wishes, I made my place at those tables because I was unobtrusive to class assignments, which mitigated class distractions. Although the instructors gave me permission to observe the classes, they took the responsibility of asking the students outside of my presence. That
was their choice of procedure, and was completely fine, but all of the students apparently either did not understand who I was or had simply not made the connection between the teachers’ announcement of a future observer with my addition to the classroom. New students are a part of this ESL program’s rolling admission, so the students are used to new, shy students who at times sequester themselves to the corner before feeling comfortable enough to vocally participate in open dialogue. As the instructors and I later laughed about, the students who didn’t make the connection evidently thought I was another foreign student taking ESL classes. A few times, the professor gave worksheets to a student to hand out to the class. As the Syrian woman passed me, she tentatively laid a sheet on my desk and asked in broken English, “You want paper?” I politely declined, saying, “No thank you. I do not need a paper.” Until this point of my observations, I could no longer be simply “a fly on the wall.” At this time, they realized I wasn’t a student and that I could speak perfect English. Most of the students in the advanced and intermediate classes practiced their English with me or asked for my help on homework and in-class assignments.

Findings and Data Analysis

Ethnography research viewed through the lens of Howard Giles’ communication accommodation theory (CAT) wielded various themes and patterns from student and teacher interaction. Below, the observed environment and people within the setting are detailed. The interaction patterns are detailed into CAT subcategories (Giles, 2008; Marlow & Giles, 2008). This study lasted nearly one month. I observed about three days per week for six hours each day, from roughly 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.
**Physical environment.**

The adult education center is a multi-faceted building with various functions available. The ESL center uses two classrooms and a few smaller offices and meeting rooms on the second floor of the old, four-story building. The offices and meeting rooms are rarely used, if at all, by the students. The teachers even do not use them, except for the start and finish to each day. They move around too often from class to class, gathering materials from the storage hallway closets or copy machine. The second floor’s main hallways are gray tiled with in-set, rarely used light gray lockers. Bright, rust-orange bricks line the bottom eight feet of the walls. Pastel yellow painted plaster and deep-stained wooden crown molding complete the top four feet of the walls, while the 12-foot white ceilings drop linear florescent lights. These three-foot lights and all outlets have external electric lines running along the walls to power them. The entire ESL wing of the building has old, sealed wooden floors that show wear marks and stains. While waiting for classes to start, the foreign ESL students regularly sit, leaning against the lockers and talk, study or complete unfinished homework. The only time there is teacher-student interaction is when the ESL instructors walk from class to class, and even then it is simply a greeting in passing.

The two classrooms are divided between the pre-beginner and beginner levels and the intermediate, advanced and citizenship levels. When students walk into the beginner classroom, they first walk through a storage hallway where there is always freshly brewed coffee available to anyone. Generally only small talk happens here, and students reserve interaction for their like-cultured classmates who speak the same native language. Once they cross the next threshold into the classroom, they walk toward one of four computers
in order to sign in and out for the day. Because this program is government-funded and free to students, they are required to record their ESL lab usage.

Although the two learning rooms are reserved for the two distinct learning levels, everything is similarly arranged. Tables in each room cultivated more of a discussion environment than a lecture hall. They were never all facing the teacher at the front of the classroom, but rather in a circle or rectangle. Each student could easily see the instructor as he was giving instruction or communicating with the class, but sitting in the natural curve of the tables, all the students were looking at each other. All chairs swivel on wheels with gray-blue upholstery, which matches the plain gray tables. Both rooms have one wall completely covered with wood-trimmed old, blown glass windows, which allow light to pour into the classrooms. Each room has multiple window air-conditioning units and heat radiators lining the wall. The ESL instructors use wall projectors and smart boards as teaching aids, although antiquated chalkboards line the inside walls of both classrooms. Nothing educational is ever written on the chalkboards; they’re only used as extra space to hang group projects or as scribbling areas for students. Both classrooms have bookshelves and file cabinets discreetly tucked away in low-traffic areas. Educational stickers and laminated posters entirely cover the metal file cabinets and language books – dictionaries, ESL guidebooks, and various magazines – fill the bookshelves along the walls.

**People within the setting.**

The people in this setting seldom varied. The two instructors were the only two in teaching capacities within the school’s ESL branch. They each teach five classes from 9:15 a.m. to 2:45 p.m. five working days per week with breaks at 10:30, 11:45, 12:45, and 1:45.
The lower-level instructor teaches a listening lab, pre-beginner, beginner and phonics courses and the upper-level instructor is in charge of the intermediate, advanced, citizenship, and English as a foreign language certification. He is also the teacher who focuses students on the complex grammar. Both offer one-on-one meetings with individual students on a first-come, first-serve basis to discuss various needs prompted by the students.

There are about 30 regular students in the combined classes. Many of them take various levels of the offered ESL classes throughout any given day. Attendance is not mandatory at the free center, which can make it difficult for the instructors when a student has gaps in learning content. They attend classes as they want to and have time for, so any given day's attendance can fluctuate greatly from the previous day to the next. Student nationalities differ greatly and fairly evenly. No one culture dominates any of the student body. Represented cultures are roughly 30% Middle Eastern, 30% African, 26% Asian, 9% Latino and 5% European. Student ages also differ greatly. All are adults, given the adult education center, but student life stages range from recent high school graduates to grandparents.

Very rarely does anyone else visit or appear in this ESL environment. In my month's time observing at the school, the custodial staff and the school's administrators were the only others to enter the classrooms or hallways. Custodians walked through the ESL wing, gathering trash from the trashcans at times throughout the day, but never verbally interacted with anyone. There were only simple acknowledging head nods toward any teacher or student within close proximity during his routine stop. Trashcans were located directly inside the classroom doorframes, so there was never any reason to enter much
Further. Any other sweeping or mopping happened after the ESL teachers and students left at night. Administrators visited only one day in order to observe and take notes on teacher performance. Within the classrooms, they simply observed as outsiders. They were introduced to the students at first in order to explain their presence, but that was the extent of the verbal communication aside from a short departing, “Goodbye.”

**Interaction patterns.**

The salient interaction patterns and themes dealt with ESL students and teachers converging speech patterns through the lens of Howard Giles’ Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) (Marlow & Giles, 2008). This theory suggests that when communicating with people from another culture, speakers’ interactions fall into one of three main categories: converging, diverging, or maintaining. In describing the ESL classroom interactions, I focused more on non-verbal and paralinguistic (pauses, utterance length, and speech rate) communication than most linguistic (language and accent) cues. I forwent English-speaking details because the students and teachers obviously had to speak English because of the native language differences. Therefore, I focused my attention on the communicators’ body language and non-verbal cues while speaking English, rather than the language. Also, none of the speakers spoke English well enough to adopt an accent outside of their native language’s English accent.

**Converging: Accommodation**

I combined Giles’s (2008) subcategories of accommodating and over-accommodating under the converging category. The outcomes of these styles of speech are
not exactly alike, but over-accommodating fits best with a converging style attitude. A general example of this is when someone moves for an extended period to another area that speaks and behaves differently than to what the person is accustomed. If the outsider converges his or her speech and behavioral patterns, he or she will adopt the local accents and customs in order to fit in with the crowd.

The most apparent behavioral style present in the classroom was the professors’ verbal and non-verbal attitude setting of the classroom environment in their opening statements of each class and instructions for the day. In each of their separate classes, both conveyed relaxed characteristics, and were comfortable in individual-to-group communication with clear, firm speech. This was part of their training, they both said later, because of the inherent emphasis on a foreign language, the learners often are also learning not only new words, but also new sounds and mouth movements to accompany those sounds. Depending on a foreign learner's native language, the new sound can be extremely different than those to which he or she has been accustomed (Beginner ESL Instructor, 2012). When group teaching, the instructors always stood at a place where all student could easily see his movements and the projection screens, which were used in nearly every class assignment. Unless physically pointing to or writing on something on the screen, the instructors always spoke facing the class. Their speech patterns were overly pronounced and direct “so that the students not only hear our words, but see mouth movements as well” (Advanced ESL Instructor, 2012). Students, especially the advanced, felt comfortable in class discussion and individually answering questions in front of the group. Students from all cultures gave relaxed responses. Whether or not a statement was grammatically or phonetically correct, students delivered clean answers to the group and
teachers. All interactions were as clear as possible. Teachers and students alike delivered questions and answers confidently and directly. Aside from the teacher directives given from the class whiteboard, all interactions were direct with eye contact. The teachers set the precedent on classroom behavior. The immigrant students noticed the advanced and beginner instructors’ behavioral patterns and modeled their own conduct likewise. All the students were mild-mannered and respectful. No one shied away from looking the teacher directly in the eyes. No one anxiously mumbled toward anyone else, either, although various times student speech had too thick of an accent to be completely understood between cultures, even between those of the same culture.

Although teachers overemphasized mouth movements, both the advanced and beginner ESL instructors always hesitated slightly after comments, which gave the interactions tentative undertones. The teachers gave hesitation when talking to the ESL students most often after open-ended questions and directions. This was the interaction pattern that teachers portrayed most frequently. The most obvious behavioral patterns occurred with slight head tilts and eye squinting once their statements had been made, like they were searching for or awaiting a solicited class response. Generally, students reacted quietly to these gestures. Vocally, they made no sounds, or responses for that matter, and all the students sat still until further instructions were offered and explained in more detail. In conversation or class activities, once they were given the chance to speak, they routinely took short pauses to form thoughts and make proper conjugations and translations without rushing an answer. These pauses seemed to mirror and converge with each instructor’s mannerisms, not so much because of the nonverbal pauses themselves, but because of their nature. Although the instructors generally “pause to see if the students understand, the
students pause because probably they just need more time to conjugate verbs, set up the English grammar or just to mentally translate separate words” (Beginner ESL Instructor, 2012). No one spoke over anyone else in this ESL classroom environment, so students conveyed an obvious comfort in the slight thinking pauses as they structured thoughts and responses. This was how the students accommodated to the instructors’ pauses in sentence construction. The teachers did it to convey the most basic, concise forms for the English learners who at times need clear speech. Because of this, the students felt comfortable to take pauses for their own sentence construction and mental translations.

The group of students in this ESL classroom and their teachers converged into a very understanding and respectful group. There was respectful convergence because of the common goal. There was a common purpose that bound them. Therefore, any type of divergence would have been counterproductive to the group goal; each student seemed to be aware of this unspoken connection and that no one person was greater than any other (Advanced ESL Instructor, 2012). The students all knew they were all relatively equal, regardless of status in their native country. Jacobson (2003) observed the same with students of his ESL classes: Although his class was composed almost entirely of Haitians, the upper and lower social class immigrants eventually desegregated themselves and worked together after realizing their sociolinguistic level of English leveled their social status in the U.S. Whether they held high standing in their previous country, in the ESL classroom they were relatively equal to whatever prominence their ESL classmates held. They shared an identity, and, could therefore seemingly set aside cultural differences, at least within the ESL classroom setting. No one ever outwardly expressed negative emotions
or behaved poorly toward anyone else because of the individually converged notion that all were interacting on an equal level.

Instructors used their hands to supplement understanding and encouraged students to use actions when describing actions or things for which they did not already know the English word. The advanced teacher would routinely use hand motions while telling stories to his students during listening activities. In various classes, he acted like a chef or athlete, describing to the class various words that describe actions of several occupations. As he said, “I mix ingredients and cook them on my stove,” he physically poured imaginary objects into an imaginary bowl and mixed them with his imaginary spatula. He then motioned as if he were placing a pan on an oven, turning the knob below and checking the burner temperature. As the athlete, he jumped as he said, “jump,” ran in place when he said, “run,” and made a throwing motion when he said, “throw.” The ESL students adopted his actions and converged their own when they were unable to think of an English word. Regularly during student responses to the class, they made certain motions silently and said, “What is the word for ...” Classmates spoke up during these moments and aided the speaker with ideas for what the target word could be. A common ESL classroom theme in these situations was when a student was vocally searching for a word and physically describing it, students from different cultures would yell out their ideas in English. As the student heard the different ideas and answers offered, he or she looked toward her like-culture classmates and discuss word choices and meanings in their native language. Once a consensus was reached in the native language, they would return to English and finish their statements. The instructors performed the actions of certain words and they obviously knew the corresponding English words. The students, on the other hand, adopted that
similar style of classroom behavior. Although the reasoning was different, this accommodation was prompted by the initial actions of the ESL instructors.

**Diverging: Under-accommodation**

Diverging happens when people from a certain culture express negative stereotypes about a different culture group and are not willing to appreciate or value the others’ needs. One stereotypical example is cross-generational. Elders always reflect on “good old days” and label today’s youth as lazy or entitled without taking time to acknowledge a generational change in culture. This emotionally isolates the elders and pushes the youth to believe elders will never respect them.

There were no strong interaction themes or patterns in which ESL classroom interaction participants diverged, that is, adopted different behavioral styles.

**Maintaining: Non-accommodation**

Communicators maintain, or accentuate, native behavioral and speech patterns to emphasize social identity. This commonly happens when a group enters a new environment. To find comfort, group individuals stress native dialect or frequently recall in-group details and characteristics. The comfort is found in familiarity. This familiar, often defining characteristic of certain cultures is what offers the relief in a strange, new environment. In a new setting with an entirely different language, a person’s native language is often the most easing in-group detail to turn to.

Non-accommodation happened often at different levels between the beginner and advanced classes. Beginning students were generally shier and more reserved, which
caused them to retreat and disengage from the instructors’ classroom activities. Spouses and family units were regular attendees of the entry-level and phonetic class sections. As they were together, they provided easy ways for each other to escape the then-present difficulties and perceived embarrassments of word choice and language translation. Behind awkward laughing, they looked at each other and began speaking their native language with those who shared it. During these situations, the teachers sat silently for a few moments while the scene played out. Generally, the students recomposed themselves after a few moments and continued the exercise at hand. The instructors seemed rather helpless because “there’s nothing to do. Most of the time they’re speaking in languages we don’t understand. That can range from Czech to Mandarin to Farsi” (Beginner ESL Instructor, 2012). Another point to be made of CAT’s non-accommodation is that people do not typically enjoy being recipients of non-accommodating messages; as Giles (2008) observed, the messages can easily be interpreted as suggesting the sender has no respect or positive regard for the receiver.

Another non-accommodation was not so much cultural, rather the difference in level of English. That is, the advanced ESL students did not converge with the lower level English of the beginner ESL students. The upper level students did not speak at a lower level with the beginner students. The students generally interacted with others of their same ESL level with the shared level of English. The only interactions between ESL levels were greetings and salutations. The advanced speakers simply spoke more often with other advanced students who were actively and intentionally engaging to practice English. The different levels of students rarely intermingled, even when two people were of the same
culture and nationality, but did not speak the same level of English. In the ESL classroom environment, like-cultured students interacted with students of their own English level.

The manner in which advanced students maintained their cultural identity was by chatting with others from their cultural in-group in various patterns throughout ESL classes. There were two different themes in this maintaining subgroup. The first was simply conversing during class downtime. Especially in the advanced classes, many students outperform others and finish class work early. As students generally sat in cultural in-groups, they whispered to each other to pass time, usually in their native language. The second advanced student non-accommodation pattern was during teacher-and-student open dialogue or questioning. Most of the advanced students spoke English well enough to participate in conversation with the teacher and students of other nationalities. But during this time, as mentioned earlier, they often simply lacked the English lexicon to concisely communicate what they wanted. The pattern at that point was to then look around and listen for vocabulary offerings of other students. If no word was found, the student looked for another speaker of his or her own native language – usually sitting on either side – and quickly crouched down. The students began speaking in their native language, chattering until they reached a consensus. The initial student stood up and finished the original statement. An interesting detail of this pattern is the classmates' awareness and understanding not to vocally intercede on the searching student’s behalf. There is an unspoken understanding that the speaking student has the floor until he or she verbally acknowledges and relinquishes that right. These actions by beginner and advanced students alike maintain not only their linguistic style, but also build camaraderie between those of like cultural in-groups.
Discussion

For the students of this classroom, navigating classroom environment has become second nature. The physical setting is simplistic, with two rooms and a short hallway between them. No obviously offending actions happen within the walls of these cultural ESL classes, which shows the amount of control and guidance the instructors give. It also suggests that the students take note of more than just the English classroom reading, writing and listening content. They are also aware of the social norms to be followed and individual places within that context.

The purposeful social interactions posed within these ESL classrooms aided learning by using student histories and student lexicons. Both ESL instructors in this environment encouraged learners to use the then-current knowledge of English in order to express themselves. This allows students to not only practice, but also improve their writing, editing and revision skills. This observation coincides with what Ernst & Richard (1994) found regarding classroom group work with fellow students of other cultures and languages. This classmate collaboration also created numerous opportunities for passing sociolinguistic knowledge between cultures, supporting what Jacobson (2003) discovered. Camaraderie was established through the students making hand gestures to find word meanings. Although the speakers searched for certain English words through hand gestures, they also used their known lexicon in order to ask others around them for help, focusing on using what they know rather than what they lack. Ernst & Richard (1994) found this as well, stating that focus on known content positively reinforces student perception and encourages a perpetually constructive learning environment. This teacher-
employed strategy allowed students to build vocabulary with positive connections and classroom accommodation, or convergence, which gave students comfort in the knowledge of structure in a foreign place.

The instructors in this ESL classroom pushed students to respond in as much English, the target language, as the students could. Generally, beginning students used more of their native languages, which was understandable given their situations (Beginner ESL Instructor, 2012). But, the students, especially those in the advanced classroom, seldom spoke in their native language, most likely because of the instructor’s seating arrangement where students were encouraged to sit by other cultures. Although the advanced ESL instructor allowed native language in his classroom for certain uses, he believed, as supported by Huerta-Macias and Kephart (2009), that English should be used as much as possible in order to elicit mistakes and subsequent corrections for improvement.

CAT divides classroom communication patterns into separate and easily identifiable subcategories. This helped the meaning-making process in which everything was a part, from the physical environment to the people and their interactions. Depending on class activities and speech level, teachers used surroundings and classroom environment to supplement learning and push the learners through added vocabulary in speaking and writing exercises. The students were afforded the ease of transition in using their native language in the ESL classroom, although not with structural intention from the instructor. The teachers nurtured exchanges of ideas and experiences, not only from individual to the group, but also from individual to individual across nationalities. This encouraged communication and ultimately the usage of new facets of a desired second language.
Chapter Five: Summaries and Conclusions

Study Limitations

A month’s time was spent researching and gathering data to structure the ESL classroom’s themes and interaction patterns. This study could have been better completed with changes to the data collection. But there are also inherent limitations with ethnographic research. An observer’s presence itself affects subject behavior in various ways (Neuman, 2006). Although perhaps in a small way in this ethnographic study, the ESL students and teachers may have slightly changed actions because of my presence and their knowledge and awareness of my note-taking (Bresler, 1996). The qualitative nature of ethnographies can also prove to be problematic. They can provide rich detail and facets that survey data gathering cannot offer, but they generally lack the hard data and black-and-white quantitative results given through questionnaire results (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Therefore, it is also difficult and time consuming to compare this data to other like-ethnographic studies because of these qualitative results.

With more allotted time in the classroom, the study could have perhaps yielded deeper connections and themes. Although a month’s time yielded the documented results and findings, more time would have allowed for possibly richer data and more specific themes and interaction patterns between the ESL teacher and students. Ethnographic researchers need ample amounts of time in order to systematically structure interaction patterns and themes in a new environment. Time is the most important resources an ethnographer needs because of the data analyzing after the data collecting through observation, note taking, photography and interviewing have completed.
Recommendations for Further Study

This ethnographic study opened ideas for various avenues for additional specific research. Ethnographers can observe further the interaction patterns of each individual culture within the ESL classroom environment. Numerous themes began to emerge outside the scope of this study. Most of them dealt with seemingly culture-specific nonverbal and linguistic maintaining behaviors in the classroom. It is recommended that future research investigate these potential themes and patterns affect classroom behavior and how ESL instructors can use gathered data to further shape classroom coursework and learning activities. Additional background research on researched cultures would also prove useful in understanding and potentially anticipating future behaviors.

A second recommendation is for additional research into the native language content spoken during English lessons. This would require fluency or an understanding of the students’ native language, or at least some manner with which to translate the native language interactions. These findings would as well give insight in culture-specific ideas for supplementing classroom discussion and language learning.

Ethnographic Reflection

During my month’s time observing the English as a second language (ESL) classroom, I became very aware of certain traits discussed previously in this thesis. At first, though, it was much more difficult. Initially gathering this ethnographic data was intimidating and confusing until I narrowed the information for which I was looking by using Giles’s communication accommodation theory (CAT). Although the subsequent
information gathering was still chaotic at times, CAT allowed me to pinpoint certain themes and patterns within the interactional environment. The information quickly became manageable and the structure of the findings began to flow. Developing a relationship with the instructors took little time. This was not an initial major worry because on the inherent nature of the ethnographic study. My role as a peripheral observer had little to do with interaction; therefore I was never preoccupied with my relationship level with the instructors. I had already received the initial access into the classroom, the rest of my role was to allow them to teach naturally and stay out of their way. They were not under the same restrictions and guidelines as other local public school teachers, but they always communicated professionally with me inside and out of the classroom.

Conclusion

This ethnography study produced many significant observations and patterns within the context of an ESL classroom. Among those were the description and understanding of the physical environment in which these immigrant adult ESL students learn. The community roundtable style promoted discussion and allowed all the students to see not only the professor, but the rest of the classroom members and demographics, as well. The advanced ESL instructor uses this design to his advantage educationally and to force different cultures to work together. He said he rarely assigns seating, but to cut down on native language use, he often asks students to sit between two different cultures. On group projects he usually requires intercultural pairs. Both instructors claim the students have never been aggravated toward another culture in the classroom, but after new students complete several class assignments with intercultural partners, there was a
noticeable difference in seating arrangements. Students freely sit with others from different cultures. This encouraged intercultural interaction provides the immigrants with language practice as well as concepts and tools to help them understand dynamics of the diversity they will encounter in the U.S. (Thomas, 2006).

The use of Howard Giles’s CAT allowed the grouping of ESL classroom interactions. Although various factors affect intercultural interactions, no culture in this study purposefully condescended on another. In fact, other than diverging in order to sustain common bonds, this diverse demographic followed the teachers’ relaxed social nonverbal and linguistic cues in classroom behavior. The ESL instructors used the available space and cultures to mold and shape classroom discussion and activities. The students’ real-world work and social situations outside the classroom guided classroom discourse. In addition to providing a space for learning local social norms, these classroom discussions afforded the students opportunities to experiment with their second language and practice new vocabulary in a safe, trusting environment before applying verbal and nonverbal assumptions in a foreign setting.
References


