

# Perspectives on Miscommunication between Native and Nonnative Speaker Interactions

Hye-Kyung Ryoo  
(Kyung Hee University)

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The present study investigates interactions between native and nonnative speakers of English with respect to how the interactions were perceived by participants themselves and what factors influenced their perceptions. Specifically, it aims at investigating how and why certain interactions were judged as successful or problematic through the use of participants' own comments regarding their judgments about the interactions. Some specific incidents of miscommunication were analyzed in terms of how they happened and are perceived by the participants. 'Let it pass' strategy was suggested to be a distinctive feature of the interactions between participants. Finally, conversational features for the interactions that were judged successful and problematic were also examined.

**Key words:** Native/nonnative speaker interactions, intercultural communication, interlanguage pragmatics and discourse, miscommunication

## 1. Introduction

Pragmatic and discourse aspects of interlanguage and other components of nonnative speakers' communicative competence have attracted much attention from researchers in the last three decades. Much work has found that even nonnative speakers who speak their second language well enough to produce perfect grammatical sentences may nevertheless differ significantly from native speakers in certain aspects of communications in the target language (Blum-Kulka, 1982; Thomas, 1983; Eisenstein & Bodman, 1993). The pragmatic differences of nonnative speakers from native speakers realized in their uses of speech acts or politeness which are often categorized as "pragmatic failure" has been a major focus of many

interlanguage pragmatics studies (Thomas, 1983). The emphasis of those studies has primarily been on nonnative speakers' pragmatic failure and linguistic deficiency as the major sources responsible for miscommunication (Varonis & Gass, 1985; House, 1993).

In the field of interlanguage communication studies so far, nonnative speakers' limited second language performance and miscommunication are assumed to be inherent in native and nonnative interactions (House & Kasper, 1987; Cohen & Olshtain, 1993). Therefore, it has been believed that the success or failure of interactions between native speakers and nonnative speakers largely depends on the ability of both participants to avoid miscommunication caused by different sets of pragmatic or socio-cultural rules and behavioral patterns of nonnative speakers (Wolfson, 1989).

It has been a taken-for-granted assumption widely held in many interlanguage studies that there exists a positive co-relation between nonnative speakers' linguistic deficiency and miscommunication in native and nonnative speaker interactions. In other words, the limited second language competence of nonnative speakers can be directly linked to the frequent communication problems in their interactions with native speakers. The present study is an attempt to look closely at nonnative speakers' second language performance and conversational patterns realized in interactions with native speakers. Specifically, it aims to investigate how the overall outcomes of interactions were perceived and conceptualized by the participants themselves. The present study is a qualitative and descriptive approach to investigate how and why certain interactions were evaluated as successful or problematic, which was revealed through the participants' own words.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Miscommunication and Native/Nonnative Interaction**

There has been a growing number of studies investigating interactional patterns between native and nonnative speakers of English (House, 1993; Zuengler, 1993a, 1993b; Tyler, 1995) and miscommunication in those interactions (Gumperz, 1982; Varonis & Gass, 1985). It has been assumed that misunderstandings are frequently produced in native-nonnative inter-

actions since the participants may have radically different customs, modes of interaction, notions of appropriateness, and, of course, linguistic systems. One of the major motivations for the researchers working in this framework is to try to understand how miscommunication occurs and why it develops.

Major causes of miscommunication are claimed to be pragmatic failure and nonnative speakers' falling back on their native language pragmatic norms and conventions (House & Kasper, 1987; Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990). Some other possible causes of miscommunication are also suggested by different researchers. For example, Gumperz (1982) suggests interlocutors' differences in the use of contextualization cues as a major source of miscommunication. Tannen (1985) emphasizes the importance of different conversational styles. Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982) suggest many types of problematic areas for nonnative speakers such as rhetorical strategies, subtle cues involved in conversation, and tone of voice.

A new issue that has been raised related to miscommunication studies is in regards to the data analysis method employed in those studies. Many miscommunication studies have their limitations in investigating possible sources of problems in that they only consider nonnative speakers' limited second language performance as the probable causes of miscommunication (Varonis & Gass, 1985; Fiksdal, 1989; Kasper, 1989; House, 1993). In such studies, data are usually analyzed based on nonnative speakers' linguistic or extralinguistic failure to come up with pragmatic norms of the target culture or language. Thus, nonnative speakers are often depicted as incompetent and defective communicators rather than as individuals participating in communicative interactions.

In fact, it is by no means a simple and clear matter to decide that pragmatic failure or pragmatic transfer on the part of nonnative speakers is truly the only locus of the misunderstanding. Singh, Lele, and Martohardjono (1988) make a strong argument that studies of miscommunication in native and nonnative interactions have been biased in that they tend to analyze data in a unidirectional way. They argue that it is often the native speaker interactant that is misunderstood by the nonnative speaker. However it is more complex than one person just being misunderstood by another. According to Singh, et al. (1988), what is missing is a bi-directional perspective that both interactants are contributing equally in constructing miscommunication. This is, I strongly believe, an important analytical perspective that should be taken in any interactional analysis of

miscommunication. It should be taken into account that the causes of miscommunication are located not only in the occasional lapses of the nonnative speakers' interlanguage, but they may well be in the interpretive schema of native speakers as well.

The interactional approach to the analysis of native and nonnative communication has brought out a recognition of the close relationships between specific contexts and various uses of the language of interactants. Moving beyond mere analysis of nonnative speakers' pragmatic deficiency, researchers are becoming more interested in how social contexts and settings influence language uses by both participants in interactions (Hall, 1995; Siegal, 1996). Hall (1995) claims that individual language use is closely related to contexts in which it is embedded such as communication goals and individual roles in specific communicative situations. Therefore, individuals, whether they are native or nonnative speakers should be understood as interactive participants who participate in interactions by using their resources and adjusting those resources in specific contexts and situations. Keeping this in mind, the nonnative speaker is no longer viewed as an imperfect communicator, but can be seen as an equally competent (not in a linguistic sense) participant who tries to achieve meaningful communication with his/her interactant.

From this perspective, it is by no means surprising to encounter very successful and meaningful interactions between native and nonnative speakers. In fact, successful interactions between native and nonnative speakers are commonly encountered in everyday situations. Related to the successful communication of nonnative speakers in their target language, concern has been raised about overly emphasized aspect of unsuccessful and problematic communication between two groups (Firth & Wagner, 1997; Liddicoat, 1997). Firth and Wagner (1997) properly point this out as follows:

What SLA tends to overlook, however - perhaps because it is less psychologically salient - is that people do, often, succeed in communicating (in a FL) by using whatever competencies they have at their disposal. It is the explication of the successful deployment of communicative resources - as indicators of the dynamics of S/FL acquisition - that should, among other things, be added to SLA's research agenda. (p. 296)

As Firth and Wagner point out, not much work has been done in

investigating successful interactions between native and nonnative speakers in the field of interlanguage discourse (except for the work of Zuengler, 1993a, 1993b). Zuengler (1989) investigated the effect of conversational topics on nonnative speakers' interlanguage performance. She specifically look at participants' relative content knowledge on the topic of conversation and how it affects the conversational pattern of native and nonnative interactions. She found that nonnative speakers were active communicators when they knew more about the specific topic than their native partners did or they were the so-called experts in the area of the topic. She concludes that the relative content knowledge of nonnative speakers plays an important role in making them active and fluent communicators.

## 2.2 Methodological Consideration

One of the methodological pitfalls of claims of inherent miscommunication in native and nonnative interactions is that the incidents of problematic conversations have mainly been judged by researchers who themselves are native speakers (Haastrup & Phillipson, 1983; Varonis & Gass, 1985; House, 1993). That is, the incidents of miscommunication and conversation failure are identified by the researchers based on their intuitive judgments about what is going on in the interactions. As a result, the concept of miscommunication is being defined in many different ways in different studies depending on how the researchers judge the interaction and define what constitutes problematic interactions. For example, in Haastrup and Phillipson's (1983) study of communication disruption between native and nonnative speakers, the investigators identified when communication was disrupted using their own criteria by watching the taped interactions. They justify their procedure as follows:

On the basis of the transcriptions and our impressions from the videotapes we proceeded to draw up profiles of each learner. One can rigidly distinguish between problems seen from the learner's point of view, the native speaker's, or from the detached investigator's, but in practice these aspects are interwoven. (p. 143)

Although House (1993) employed nonnative speakers' self report about their discourse performance, it was herself, as an investigator, who identified the incidents of "inappropriate responses" of nonnative speakers and

judged them as problematic (p. 169). House defined an inappropriate responses as “a response interpreted not to be in alignment with the preceding discourse and it thus taken not to be relevant at the moment of speaking” (House, 1993, p. 169). However, in her definition, House does not specify who interprets responses and judges whether or not they are ‘relevant’.

Interpreting incidents as problematic and defining miscommunication is very important for native and nonnative interaction studies since the types of data to be investigated, to a great extent, depend on what constitutes miscommunication. There are considerable individual variances in accessing whether a certain instance is problematic or not, and it may well come from the idiosyncratic criteria of an individual who judges the cases of miscommunication. Moreover, there has been a growing concern about using the ‘native norms’ and ‘native intuition’ for judging nonnative speakers’ performance (Firth & Wagner, 1997). Nelson (1995) claims that the concept that native speakers are always right is incorrect and not helpful. The researchers, who in most cases are not the participants in actual interactions, can never have a perfect understanding or clear ideas about what was going on in actual interactions. Firth and Wagner (1997) claim that the taken-for-granted status of the nonnative speakers as a defective communicator, as judged by native speaker investigators, may mislead them to ignore other potentially relevant factors and interpretations of interactional features which can disregard the interactants’ own interpretations.

As an alternative in solving the problem of judging the miscommunication by investigators’ intuitive measures, some studies use retrospective interview sessions to find out participants’ perceptions about what went wrong in their conversations (Erickson & Shultz, 1982; Selinker & Douglas, 1986; Tyler, 1995). Introspection data has been used in many interlanguage studies. However, the motivation for most studies to employ this procedure has been to investigate cognitive processes involved in interlanguage production and communication strategies used by learners (Poulisse, Bongaerts, & Kellerman, 1987; Faerch & Kasper, 1987; House, 1993; Cohen & Olshtain, 1994). Besides, the introspection data employed in such studies are collected only from nonnative speakers, not from both participants. Cohen and Olshtain (1994) state that the advantage of using verbal report techniques in interlanguage pragmatic studies is that it provides insights into the cognitive processes underlying learners’ speech act production

and perception, which is otherwise not available to analysts.

A few studies of interlanguage pragmatics employ participants' verbal retrospection regarding their perceptions of what was going on in their interactions and in identifying sources for problematic incidents of communication. Selinker and Douglas (1986) analyzed video and audio taped interactions between a Chinese teaching assistant and native speakers by using commentary interviews of the participants as their secondary data source. In this study, the problematic or "unusual" situations were identified by the subjects themselves which guided the analysis of the interactions. Selinker and Douglas claim that using the secondary data from commentary review sessions, can provide critical insights in investigating the interactional data in that it provides ample information regarding participants' real intentions and trouble sources.

Tyler's study (1995) mentioned above also employed a retrospective interview technique with both participants who were asked to comment on the moments of miscommunication. The significance of this study is that the existence of problematic interactions was identified and reported by participants themselves in their real life situations. Specific incidents of communication problems and possible causes were identified again by the participants during the retrospective interview sessions to achieve better ideas about what was going on in actual situations.

### **3. Research Procedure**

#### **3.1. Participants**

Three Korean nonnative speakers and three American native speakers of English participated in the present study. Nonnative speaker participants were two males and one female who were attending ESL classes at a mid-western university in the United States. The duration of staying in the States for the nonnative speaker participants varied from 7 months to 1 year. The female nonnative speaker participant (Nonnative speaker A hereafter) and one of the male participants (Nonnative speaker B hereafter) were in an intermediate level of ESL class and the other male participant (Nonnative speaker C hereafter) was attending a beginner level of ESL programs at the time of the study. Native speaker participants were all females. Two of them were graduate students in Applied English Linguistics

Program and the other was an undergraduate who had been tutoring a ESL learner. The native speaker participants in this study all had some previous teaching experiences in ESL.

### 3.2 Data Collection Procedure

Each nonnative speaker participant was paired with a native speaker participant for a conversation group. A movie list that included brief descriptions about the contents of movies and some pamphlets that listed some movie posters were provided to each pair. The movies in the materials were relatively popular and well-known and were available in the local video rental stores at that time. It was assumed that 'movie' was a relatively common topic for casual conversations and expected that both native and nonnative participants had some information about the movies or their experiences of watching them.

The speech situation in this study was goal oriented in that the participants were asked to hypothesize that they were going to watch a movie together. Each group was given a specific task to choose one movie that both participants liked. Participants were supposed to share the information, negotiate, and compromise in picking out a movie among the ones in the list.

Each interaction between two participants was audio and videotaped simultaneously. In order to avoid any influence from presence of the researcher as an observer, the researcher was not present in the room while participants were having their conversations. Since it was difficult to decide whether a certain interaction should be considered successful or problematic without any distinct evidence to support that something went really wrong, the participants' own perspectives regarding their interactions were examined. Therefore, all participants were interviewed in follow-up playback sessions which were held immediately after each session. Each person participated in the playback session separately and was asked to stop the tape at any point in the exchanges he/she wanted to make any comments about. In order to avoid directing the comments into any particular points, the researcher did not specify the type of comments the participants were supposed to make. However, at the end of the playback sessions, participants were asked to comment on their overall perception on the interactional outcomes and whether they perceived their interactions as successful or problematic. Comments from all the participants in the

playback sessions were audiotaped and transcribed. The review sessions for nonnative speaker participants were conducted in Korean because it was expected that they would be more comfortable making comments in their own language.

### 3.3. Analysis

Three separate cases of interactions were videotaped. The length of each video session varied. The portions of interactions in which any comments were made by participants were transcribed in detail following Jefferson's (1979) transcription notation.

Data was analyzed in detail in order to describe exactly how participants perceived their interactions and what was happening in the commented incidents. While looking at the whole interaction, the focus was specifically on the participant's perception as to whether the interaction was successful or problematic and what triggered such perceptions.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Some Factors Contributing to Miscommunication

In this chapter some factors contributing to miscommunication that were reported by the participants are presented. Most of the times, those incidents were commented on by both native and nonnative speakers in the pair. However, some of them were commented on by only one participant. This chapter introduces those factors reported to play a role in causing miscommunication with the analysis of how they contributed to the problems in interactions.

#### 4.1.1. Pre-designing the next turn

The first type of miscommunication was reported when the nonnative speaker subjects misunderstood or did not understand the native speakers' questions. This resulted in inappropriate answers to the questions.

Excerpt 1 (Nonnative speaker B)

- 61) NNS: maybe the Korean movie company; (-) hh will be hh  
will be (-) fall down; destroyed;
- 62) NS: right.
- 63) NNS: how can I say.
- 64) NS: um it will be hurt;
- 65) NNS: will be hurt =
- 66) NS: = the economy ( ? ) suffer; (.)
- 67) NNS: not be hurt. expl-(hh hh) ode.
- 68) NS: huh hhh hhh (.) completely fall apart.
- 69) NNS: yeah.
- 70) (0.5)
- 71) NS: so they want to prot- prevent the competition?
- 72) NNS: um u:m the before on- one years; uh one years ago; (.)  
we are our (.) abandon, a- abandon; aban- abandon the  
law; which u:h banning the foreign, foreign horror  
movie; or action movie;

In the above excerpt, the native speaker asked a question in line 71, however, it was not answered by the nonnative subject in the next turn. Instead, in line 72, the nonnative speaker participant made a slight topic change which was clearly not the answer to the native speaker's question in the previous turn. It was reported by the nonnative speaker participant in the playback session that, at that point, he did not hear what his partner was saying because, instead of listening to his partner, he was thinking about what he was going to say in his next turn.

This tendency to pre-design the next turn while listening to (apparently without paying much attention to) the partners is a frequently reported tendency by all nonnative participants in the present study. That is, many times nonnative speaker participants concentrated on making up target language sentences for their next turn while their partners were talking. This prevented them from paying enough attention to what their interlocutor was saying, thus resulted in miscommunication. In fact, early works on communication strategies (Faerch & Kasper, 1983a, 1983b) report a "planning phase" (Faerch & Kasper, 1983a, p. 23) in which learners retrieve relevant linguistic resources to achieve their communicative goals before they actually produce target language structures. Faerch and Kasper (1983a, 1983b) claim that planning in L1 communication is highly

automatic and unconscious while L2 planning requires deliberate conscious efforts by the learners.

Although those studies of communication strategies claim for the existence of the planning phase they do not discuss when this planning process takes place in actual interactions. It was revealed that the nonnative speaker participants in the present study went through this planning phase while their partners were talking, which led them to be distracted from on-going interaction. Unlike “verbal planning” discussed in the work of Faerch and Kasper (1983b, p. 223) which shows learners’ cognitive planning phase explicit in their second language production through linguistic realizations such as pauses and repetitions, the planning reported in the present study did not have any visible signs. Since the nonnative speakers’ planning did not take place in their turns to talk and it did not have any explicit performance features, this type of planning processes the nonnative speaker participants went through could only be recognized by their own verbal reports.

#### 4.1.2. Lack of linguistic resources and presuming

The second type of miscommunication in the present study was found when both participants were talking about the same topic, but, with different interpretations about their partners’ intentions. The following interaction displays that both participants were talking about Michael Jordan’s involvement with the Nike company.

##### Excerpt 2 (Nonnative speaker B)

- 23) NNS: from um, (.) a few days ago; I watched the news; =  
 24) NS: =uh [huh  
 25) NNS: [and; (.) the Nike; you know the Nike?  
 26) NS: like the shoes; [ ( )  
 27) NNS: [yes, I think, (.) I- I- I can’t- I didn’t  
 understand exact but I think he has (0.1) he has some  
 right in Nike; (.)  
 28) NS: [u:h  
 29) NNS: [so (.) I think he; he has own (0.1) he has own product;  
 (.) look- I mean um do you know Nike’s logo?  
 30) NS: yeah, just do it?=  
 31) NNS: =yeah, just do it and,  
 32) NS: and a: [symbol;

- 33) NNS: [yeah. (.) but from now on, he has his own logo  
a::n (.)
- 34) NS: and the Nike symbol?=-
- 35) NNS: =yeah.
- 36) NS: I think- oh yeah, I think he's just a sponsor, of Nike.  
(.) you think he owns part of the company? Is that  
what you're saying? I don't think so.
- 37) NNS: yeah hhh but-
- 38) NS: I think he I think Nike just pays him a lot of money to  
advertise for him; (.) or for them;
- 39) NNS: but I think it's (.) little bit different because uh, but- I  
didn't understand exactly but-
- 40) NS: you didn't understand the movie?

#### NS comments

I remember thinking during this part that while he was explaining about the Nike, thinking oh, I wonder how people understand sponsors, sponsorships, thinking why do they, difficult to understand how much money they get paid where Nike ( ). I think he understood that. I think I explained that. Oh, see, that's kind of weird right there, cause seeing it, that's not how I, I thought that he was o.k. with it, but now I'm watching it, maybe he didn't understand.

#### NNS comments

What I wanted to talk about there was that I guess there was a separate department in Nike company owned by Jordan because there seemed to be separate logos and symbols for Michael Jordan, which were different from the original Nike logo. I couldn't explain what I wanted to tell. She explained about the sponsorship, but I think that was more than a simple sponsorship.

In the playback session, it was revealed that the native speaker participant assumed that her partner was struggling with words to express the concept of 'sponsorship'. However, the nonnative participant in this interaction reported that he wanted to talk about what he knew, which was a more serious involvement of Michael Jordan with the Nike company. In lines 27, 29, and 33, the nonnative speaker participant tried to explain what he knew about the relationship between Michael Jordan and the Nike

company. However, he struggled with choosing the right words and expressions, which led him to provide examples such as new logos and symbols to support his claims as shown in lines 29, 31, and 33. However, the native speaker still assumed that her nonnative partner was talking about sponsorship in line 36 and 38. In line 39, the nonnative speaker rejected his partner's previous turn to make his points, however, he still couldn't elaborate on what he really meant to say.

In the above excerpt there were two interactional factors that came into play in the apparent miscommunication between the two participants; 1) the limited second language performance in the part of the nonnative speaker participant and 2) participants' attempts to make rough guesses out of the limited linguistic resources available in the talk. That is, we can infer from the above example that when participants face the lack of linguistic resources to make clear meaning out of the talk, they tend to depend on their inferences and assumptions about their partners' real intentions. In other words, participants employ the strategy of 'guessing' (Dornyei & Scott, 1997, p. 190) in a broad sense. This tendency to roughly guess their partners' intentions seemed to have a negative effect on the interactions.

#### 4.2. 'Let it pass' Strategy

There was a distinct characteristic of interaction patterns found in the present study that should be pointed out. It was the "let it pass" pattern of interactions which was observed also by Firth (1996) in his study of interactions among nonnative speakers in the work places. He claims that 'let it pass' is one of the strategies that listeners adopt when they are faced with unknown or unclear utterances of speakers in that they just let those unclear utterances pass by, assuming they will be clarified as the conversation progresses (Firth, 1996, p. 243). Dornyei and Scott (1995a, 1995b) also include 'let it pass' strategy in their study of communication strategies where they call it "feigning understanding" and categorize it as an indirect communication strategy. They define the strategy as "making an attempt to carry on the conversation in spite of not understanding something by pretending to understand" (p. 190).

Firth (1996) points out that, from a conversation analytic point of view and using analyst's intuitive judgment, it is difficult to see whether the problematic moments are deliberately passed or whether they are simply

missed by listeners. In fact, when simply viewing the taped interactional data, the researcher can hardly notice that the participants are having trouble understanding the current conversation. In other words, the only possible way to know that there is a problem is through the participants' own words. In this perspective, employing retrospective interviews with actual participants is a crucial and indispensable research tool to be able to get access to the underlying processes that participants in interactions go through. Therefore, in this study, participants' comments in the playback sessions were used to verify that 'let it pass' was actually allowed by participants. The following interaction shows this pattern of 'let it pass' being employed by the nonnative speaker participant.

Excerpt 3 (Nonnative speaker C)

- 63) NS: I don't think I've ever seen a movie with him before.  
[hhh hhh hhh hhh  
64) NNS: [ hhh hhh hhh  
65) NS: I don't know why. I've heard he's a good actor.

NNS comments

I didn't understand what she was talking about, but I just laughed.

In the above example, the nonnative speaker participant reported that she did not understand what her partner said in line 63, however, she just let it pass and responded to by laughing together with her partner.

Again, in the following interaction, the 'let it pass' strategy is more evident in that even though the nonnative speaker participant reported that she did not understand her partner's story telling, she apparently was showing very active listenership by providing various "uptaking devices" (House, 1993) such as 'oh, really', 'uh huh', and so on (in lines 87, 88, 91, and 93). In fact, as shown in her retrospection, the native participant considered her nonnative partner as understanding and cooperating actively.

Excerpt 4 (Nonnative speaker A)

- 84) NS: it's a comedy; (.) it takes place in a- Australia.  
85) NNS: oh, really;  
86) NS: it's about some men; (.) who lose their jobs because (.)  
I can't remember why they're union workers. I think  
they worked in a factory.

- 87) NNS: [uh huh;  
 88) NS: [or something. and they lose their jobs and so, (.) they can't find another job.  
 89) NNS: uh huh;  
 90) NS: so they become they dress as females; [ and they become strippers  
 91) NNS: [ uh huh;  
           uh huh;  
 92) NS: do you know what stripper [is?  
 93) NNS: [right.  
 94) NS: that's supposed to be very funny because it shows how men treat women or something like that.

NS comments

She's a very active listener. She's definitely looking at my eyes. and responding actively.

NNS comments

I couldn't understand the story completely.

The last example shows the case in which the native speaker participant employed the 'let it pass' strategy. The native speaker in this interaction did not quite get the meanings of her partner's talk. Nevertheless, she did not make any attempt to clarify the meaning. Instead, she responded to the nonnative speaker participant positively as shown in line 33 and 35.

Excerpt 5 (Nonnative speaker C)

- 30) NNS: Maybe, (0.1) the (.) Spielberg and the (.) another (.) another director?  
           I- I don't know, (0.2) wh- whose name is,=  
 31) NS: = I don't know.  
 32) NNS: but- the they they fight fought each other? the uh (.) they about the movie;=  
 33) NS: = uh huh,  
 34) NNS: they, they wanna, they wanna make- make a: (0.2) the (.) characteristic; the (.) which they want; and (.) each other, =  
 35) NS: = uh huh,  
 36) NNS: I'm not sure, but it's, it's will be (.) the better or not,

- (0.3) and (0.3)
- 37) NS: have they released any movies yet?  
 38) NNS: the, The Lost World? no,  
 39) NS: no,  
 40) NNS: yeah.

### NS comments

31-34: Just there, when he was struggling over that word. I wasn't sure exactly what he meant. And at other points he'll struggle little bit longer and give me a chance to like tell him the word that he is looking for. And there he didn't so, like I assumed I was gonna understand what he was saying but I didn't after that.

37: I was asking if the dream works has released any movies and I think he thought I was asking have you seen this last movie.

This 'let it pass' strategy employed by the native participant in the above excerpt is closely related to the concept of "make it normal" suggested by Firth (1996). When native speakers are faced with nonnative speakers' linguistic difficulties and problems, they are willing to tolerate abnormal usages and make them look normal even though the meaning is unclear to them. Dornyei and Scott (1995a, 1995b) claim that 'feigning understanding' has a positive role as a communication strategy in that it can in fact indirectly facilitate mutual understanding by "keeping the communication channel open" (p. 190). In other words, it helps conversation keep going without having to stop each and every turn in which participants experience problems. Firth (1996) also claims that participants tend to have the "taken-for-granted" assumption about mutual understanding and the 'let it pass' is a device through which participants achieve their communicative ends. However, Firth (1996) notes that the 'let it pass' strategy has different interactional 'robustness' depending on the types of talk-based activities. That is, whether or not the 'let it pass' strategy positively operates in interactions depends on the capacity of the activity to tolerate 'passing' the understanding problems. For example, as Firth pointed out, when there is an immediate need for the clarity of the content of conversation (such as the spelling activity, Firth (1996, p. 248)), thus requiring an explicit and specific display of understanding each turn, then, the positive role of the 'let it pass' strategy is not guaranteed. Therefore, certain communicative activities (or topics that are dealt with)

may have more tolerance for the 'feigning understanding' in Dornyei and Scott's term than others.

## 5. Considerations of Successful vs. Problematic Interactions

In this study, participants were asked to judge whether their interactions were successful or problematic. Overall, they agreed on their judgment saying their interactions were generally successful. However, there was one interaction which was considered problematic by the nonnative participant and yet, successful by the native participant like the case in the excerpt #7 below. Since the only interaction that was evaluated as problematic by the nonnative speaker was actually perceived as relatively successful by the native speaker, it can be considered neither successful nor problematic.

There were agreed conversational features of interactions among the participants with regard to the interactions they considered successful. In general, when the native speaker participants talked about the successful interactions, they mentioned nonnative speakers' active listenership (uptaking devices at the right timing), initiative moves, and verbosity. On the other hand, when the nonnative speaker participants were commenting on the successful interactions, they usually gave credits to the native speakers' cooperative moves such as completing sentences, finding the right words (for them), and verbosity. The following example is a part of an interaction that was perceived successful by both participants.

### Excerpt 6 (Nonnative speaker B)

- 95) NS: it seems to me that most of the ones I would like to see; you have already seen.
- 96) NNS: uh huh, right.
- 97) NS: but I'll be interested in Red Corner;
- 98) NNS: or, I can see it again.
- 99) NS: you can see that one again?
- 100) NNS: cause lik- I couldn't understand some of them; and I can ask about it maybe;
- 101) NS: O:H.
- 102) NNS: that's good idea, [right?
- 103) NS: [you liked it enough to see again?

- 104) NNS: right.  
 105) NS: okay, then maybe afterwards we could um get some coffee and talk about it.

### NS comments

It sounds really great because I was looking for something funny she picked up on that and we realized that we should make a decision. Now she's taking initiative, she knows I want to see something funny and she was willing to see a movie again. We were really cooperating here. We're really trying hard to be polite. She also gave me a specific reason.

The nonnative speaker in lines 98, 100, and 102 showed very active listenership by giving a suggestion and expressing her ideas. It can also be noticed that there were no significant pauses between turns in this excerpt.

The nonnative participant who judged his interaction pretty problematic blamed himself that the major problem was his incompetence in English. However, he also pointed out many incidents of long pauses in the interaction, which were coming from his native partner's uncooperative and passive attitudes throughout the interaction. The following excerpt is from the interaction judged as problematic by the nonnative speaker participant.

### Excerpt 7 (Nonnative speaker C)

- 30) NNS: Maybe, (0.1) the (.) Spielberg and the (.) another (.) another director?  
 I- I don't know, (0.2) wh- whose name is,  
 31) NS: I don't know.  
 32) NNS: but - the they they fight fought each other? the uh (.) ( ) they about the movie;=  
 33) NS: =uh huh,  
 34) NNS: they, they wanna, they wanna make- make a: (0.2) the (.) characteristic; the (.) which they want; and (.) each other,=  
 35) NS: = uh huh,  
 36) NNS: I'm not sure, but it's, it's will be (.) the better or not, (0.3) and; (0.3)

- 37) NS: have they released any movies yet?  
 38) NNS: the, The Lost World? no-  
 39) NS: no,  
 40) NNS: yeah.  
 (0.8)  
 41) NNS: do you think I- it is possible? (0.2) the, the dinosaurs  
 hhh like the (.) uh (.) can (.) be alive again?  
 42) NS: the- scient [ists [could recreate [them?  
 43) NNS: [uh huh, [sci- [uh huh,  
 maybe with the cloning or (. ) genetic engineering?  
 44) NS: from what I've read and seen on TV, it- it's not  
 possible, but I think the idea is fascinating;=  
 45) NNS: = uh huh  
 (0.3)  
 46) NNS: actually, (.) the Spielberg is genius.  
 47) NS: uh huh,  
 (1.6)  
 48) NS: huh [huh huh =  
 49) NNS: [uh huh huh  
 50) NS: =so we choose a different movie?=  
 51) NNS: ( ) uh huh,  
 (0.6)  
 52) NNS: is there I think uh,  
 (0.3)  
 53) NS: what about this, have you seen any of these Free Willy  
 movies?

### NNS comments

I haven't experienced any uncomfortable silence before with other native speakers such as my tutor and ESL teacher. I think there were many problems in the interaction. I think my pronunciation was problematic and I couldn't produce full correct sentences. My partner had a problem, too. She wasn't giving much efforts to construct interaction. I tried to think various topics and to cooperate, but she seemed not.

In this interaction, there seemed to be many cases of long pauses as well as uncomfortable laughing such as in lines 48 and 49. Furthermore, the topic did not seem to continue smoothly and it was apparently caused

by both participants' lack of elaboration of each other's turns as shown in lines 39, 40, 45, and 47.

Judging from the participants retrospective comments about their interactional outcome, we can draw on some tentative interactional patterns closely linked to the interactions judged successful. Both native and non-native participants seemed to agree that their partners' cooperative and active attitude toward the interaction were the keys to achieve positive interactional outcome. Specifically, the cooperative and active participations were verbally realized through frequent linguistic uptakes and verbosity.

## 6. Situational Considerations

Judging whether a certain interaction is successful or problematic is a very subjective matter in that even two interactants who just finished their conversation with each other can judge their interaction differently as this study shows. The discrepancy of perception between participants of the same interaction clearly shows the subjectivity and variables involved in individuals' judgment about interactional outcomes. In general, people have different expectations and standards regarding what constitutes successful communication. Furthermore, those expectations and standards often change depending on the contextual variables. That is, you have different ideas about successful communication depending on who you talk to and in what situations. Most cases of interactions investigated in the present study were judged as successful by participants in spite of a number of problematic moments and mutual lack of comprehensions. The basic mechanism that was operating in those interactions judged as successful can be understood by considering the situational and contextual variables involved. Hall (1995) referred to this as "sociohistorical perspective" and describes it as follows:

At the individual level, each of these identities is comprised of a set of behaviors, beliefs, and norms that we consider to be prototypical of that identity, and which we use to interpret and evaluate the behavior of others.

For each identity we carry certain expectations about the other's behaviors, what each is expected to do and not to do as a member of those groups, expectations which have been built up over time through socialization and participation in our own social groups (p. 215).

In case of interactions between the native and nonnative speakers studied in the present study, the interactants were prone to be conscious of each other's status as native speaker or nonnative speaker of the target language. That is, the native speaker's perception of their partners' status as nonnative speakers might have allowed them to be tolerant of abnormal linguistic features. Consequently the native speaker participants were apt to highly value the nonnative speakers' initiation, verbosity, and active listenership because they might have expected those conversational strategies to be generally difficult for nonnative speakers to perform. On the other hand, the nonnative speaker participants took into account their partners' status as native speakers and might have expected their partners to be supportive by helping them and somehow leading them to produce target-like sentences as an expert of the language being spoken. In this study, the nonnative speaker participants who judged their interactions successful attributed to their native speaker partners' active cooperation and participation as positive factors for the success. On the other hand, the native participants judged interactions successful when they perceived their nonnative partners to be relatively good communicators as judged by their expectations for them as nonnative speakers. Firth and Wagner's (1997) observation that nonnative speakers' linguistic deficiencies can be resources for aiding successful communication seems to hold true in the present study in that nonnative speakers' limited or deviant linguistic features were not major obstacles in the interactions. This, in fact, clearly shows the fact that nonnative speakers' pragmatic failures do not always cause miscommunication or unsuccessful communication.

The final point I want to make in this paper is about "interactional robustness" as suggested by Firth (1996, p. 243). Firth claims that some speech activities and situations are interactionally robust in that misunderstandings are more easily tolerated by the participants. That is, the misunderstandings or abnormalities of communication are not equally tolerable and overcome by participants in every situations. When the situations require specific attention to clarity of messages and participants' intentions, miscommunication between interactants is more likely to cause problems, and thus, such interactions are easily perceived as unsuccessful. This idea of "interactional robustness" supports the cases of unsuccessful communications in studies of international teaching assistants (hereafter ITA) (Tyler, 1990, 1995) or academic advising sessions (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992). In situations such as

interactions between an ITA and a native speaking student or academic advising sessions between international students and native speaking faculty members, the participants have specific and sometimes conflicting goals to achieve. Therefore, those interactions are more vulnerable (less robust in Firth's term) to problems and are more likely to be perceived as unsuccessful by the participants than in simple, causal everyday conversations such as the one in the present study.

## 7. Conclusion

In the present study, interactions between native and nonnative speakers of English have been analyzed with respect to their characteristics and perceived degrees of success. Some cases of problematic incidents of interactions were also analyzed and the 'let it pass' strategy of conversation was discussed. Data analysis revealed that the native and nonnative speaker participants in the present study were indeed collaborating in interactions in order to achieve meaningful and successful communication in spite of the apparent linguistic limitations of the nonnative speaker participants. In addition, this paper has discussed how participants' expectations toward each other based on their native and nonnative status affected their perception of successful communication.

The present study confirms the claim of Firth and Wagner (1997) about the ample possibility of successful communication in native and nonnative interactions and the ability of nonnative speakers to succeed in communication in spite of their limited resources in the target language. Investigations like the present study, which includes an analysis of successful interactions between native and nonnative speakers, give us some understanding of the characteristics involved in successful communication. Furthermore, it will eventually help second language learners improve their pragmatic and discourse competence by properly adopting effective conversational patterns and strategies for successful communication. This will be possible by letting them look back and evaluate their own second language performance and trying to find out effective ways to achieve successful interactions with native speakers.

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**Appendix. Transcription conventions  
(From Jefferson, 1979)**

[            ]	overlapping utterance
=	latch (no interval between adjacent utterances)
(0.0)	intervals between utterances (timed in tenths of a second)
-	halting, abrupt cutoff
((pause))	untimed pauses
colon (:)	extension of the sound or syllable
period (.)	fall intonation
comma (,)	continuing intonation
question mark (?)	a rising intonation
question mark and comma combination (;)	rising intonation weaker than a question mark
underline	emphasis, louder voice
hhh, hhh.	laughing
((    ))	a description of some phenomenon
> <	quicker than the surrounding talk
(    )	transcriptionist doubt

Hye-Kyung Ryoo  
 Kyung Hee University  
 1, Suchen-ri, Giheung-eup  
 Yongin-si, Gyeonggi-do  
 449-701 Seoul, Korea  
 E-mail: hryoo2002@yahoo.com

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