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How to cite:

Nicolson, Margaret and Adams, Helga (2008). Travelling in space and encounters of the third kind: Distance language learner negotiation of speaking activities. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 2(2) pp. 105–116.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: [\[not recorded\]](#)

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.2167/illt001.0>

<http://www.multilingual-matters.net/illt/AoP/pdf/illt001.pdf>

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# **Travelling in Space and Encounters of the Third Kind: Distance Language Learner Negotiation of Speaking Activities**

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Debates on language learner identity, sociocultural aspects of language learning and the 'third space, the domain created as a result of interaction between people or between a person and a new experience' (Bhaba, 1994, 1990) have become increasingly relevant in research in teaching and learning, often in the search for better student integration and success. Most of the focus has been on students in conventional institutional settings or students living in a different culture or country to the one from which they originate. This paper aims to add to the debate by critically examining the interplay between learner identity and methods used in the management of speaking activities in the language classroom, specifically with regard to the adult distance context. It offers discussion on the challenges that confront teachers who have to undertake occasional face-to-face teaching with distance students. It focuses on how to create a positive 'third space' for students in this setting by critically examining commonly held views on task types, task content, group management and classroom language use.

doi: 10.2167/jillt001.0

## **Introduction**

The impetus for this paper arose from observations in tutorials for adult distance learners over a 10-year period, from the inception of the language teaching programme at the Open University (OU) in 1995. As staff developers, teachers and researchers, we constantly evaluate what happens in language tutorials and latterly found ourselves questioning our beliefs about good practice to which we had staunchly clung and had encouraged others to follow. We realised that greater methodological discrimination was emerging as a key factor in distance student success in the face-to-face language tutorials, particularly as student groups became more diverse. Guangwei (2002: 93) has said that 'methodology is only effective to the extent that teachers and students are willing to accept and implement it with good faith, and whether it is accepted or not is largely determined by the set of values and beliefs that these teachers and students have been socialised into'. Although writing of the move to import communicative language teaching (CLT) unquestioningly into the English language classroom in China, Guangwei's points are valid beyond the geographical confines of which he writes. The interface between learner identity and the way we organise and manage our classroom activity is a complex meeting point and requires sensitive handling,

particularly with a diverse group of adult distance learners. Through the language learning process, as Norton (1997b: 141) points out, students 'are . . . constantly organising and re-organising a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world [and] . . . are . . . engaged in identity construction and negotiation'. In this paper we assume a poststructuralist view of identity as a fluid and complex concept, non-essential, context-dependent and predicated not only on our own view of ourselves but also on how others view us (Hall, 1996). Language is arguably the most fluid element of identity, as Crawshaw *et al.* (2001: 103) discuss: 'the constantly renewable supplement to ourselves . . . [containing] within itself its own incompleteness'.

How teachers of distance students and those responsible for their staff development manage speaking skills in the classroom, and the methods and tasks they adopt in the language teaching process, are crucial in minimising difference and sites of conflict or discomfort about identity, in allowing new identity-building to happen and enabling students to create their new third space. If we fail to be aware of these challenges facing teachers and students alike, we create difficulties in sociocultural integration and, as Horwitz *et al.* point out, in communication and confidence (Horwitz, 1986: 219).

To borrow an idea from phenomenological geography, students need to:

. . . find their place in the existing order . . . through what is usually called 'acculturation' or . . . contribute to the creation of a new space in which they can evolve, which they can explore, not necessarily alone, but possibly with other 'outsiders', or even in their interaction with insiders, thus setting up a sort of hybrid, 'third space', allowing for all to have their own place. (Fougère, 2003: 5)

In the distance setting these challenges are acutely felt but less well explored, something this paper aims to do.

## Identity and Societal Change

Being attuned to a broad societal picture will inform how teachers of adult distance learners proceed. Globalisation along with increased societal fragmentation has led to a greater awareness of identity, often arising from difference. There exists a larger gap between generations, particularly in mores and values, attributable to the fast rate of social and educational change, making differences between age groups more noticeable. The gap between ethnic and cultural groups has also become more apparent. Four factors are at work. Firstly, in the search to assert our identity in a global world where universalism reigns, we reinforce difference rather than underplay it. Secondly, on the global scale, social encounters with diverse cultures, races or lifestyles are more frequent. Thirdly, social units are, on the whole, less stable. Fourthly with increased mobility has come a segmentation of places, which according to Fougère (2003: 3), results also in a segmentation of the self. The individual's identity is therefore potentially more complex than ever before. The need to understand 'difference' is more acute. If difference was encountered in the past it presented less of an issue, the instinctive result, we suggest, of a greater

courtesy culture, embedded in polite behaviour, where only certain topics and forms of questioning were considered appropriate. Difference is embraced and protected in a more formal way now, in education, in employment law and in the justice system, a necessity in a society of greater ethnic, religious and cultural diversity. Institutionalisation of such matters has caused a general expectation, even in day-to-day contacts, that others will be sensitive to who we are. Also, members of Western capitalist society have raised expectation levels, having reached the top of Maslow's pyramid of needs (Maslow, 1970). Maslow's category of self-actualisation, which embraces the realisation of personal potential, self-fulfilment and the search for personal growth and peak experiences, is to the fore, and what we expect from others increases as a result, another issue for teachers in the distance setting to ponder.

Against this background OU students are also, arguably, the most diverse in UK Higher Education in age, lifestyle and educational background and by implication have a greater variety of needs. As a result, 'Equal Opportunities' and 'Meeting your Needs' policies have had to form a cornerstone of the university's ethos. In turn, students expect more from the OU and its distance teachers than from other HE providers. Against this complex background, the challenge for the distance teacher is to create a learning environment where diversity does not detract from progression or cohesion.

## Identity in the Language Classroom

We bring several types of identity markers to any situation. Some, such as age, gender, appearance, accent, mother tongue origin or speech patterns, are more easily discernible. Others, such as ethnic origin, disability, special needs or marital status, may vary in degree of perceptibility, depending on the presence of visible or audible clues. There is, however, no guarantee that others will read the clues correctly as appearances are deceptive and different people interpret markers in different ways. A further category of markers may be gleaned, correctly or not, from aspects extraneous to the tutorial, for example, being seen dropped off at the tutorial venue by assumed husband and children. Classroom speaking activities will reveal additional markers related to family, educational background, religion or job if the focus is on real-life information-gathering (provided the truth is told by students). Other markers may *become* discernible through classroom activity, for example opinions, political leanings, personality, ways of interacting with others and emotional state.

Stratton (2005: 228) and Andersen (1998: 74), referring to Heidegger, also discuss the impact of pre-understandings based on past experiences. In the language learning situation examples might include, 'the teacher is an authority figure', 'as a student I am a passive receptor', 'as a student I will be constantly evaluated' and 'the classroom is a scary place'. Pre-understandings of a different sort may emerge from contact with the institution. For instance, the student's interpretation of information received prior to course-start, will be influenced by their previous experience. Optimally, the provider's and the teacher's role should be to help the student overcome negative signals

based on pre-understandings. Old monsters cause anxiety: for example, 'I know I will be expected to speak in tutorials and I always get nervous about this' and 'I know that the teacher is meant to listen if I have problems but I don't find it easy to communicate personal things'. The challenge for the teacher is to manage the students' pre-understandings while at the same time confronting and questioning their own interpretation of the student's identity markers.

The basis of language classroom activity is organised social interaction and, as Fruggeri (in McNamee & Gergen, 1992: 43) suggests, 'Beliefs held by individuals construct realities and realities are maintained through social interaction...'. Judgements arise as a result of reality construction. Once judgements are in force, values are assigned, with individuals or groups believing they are better, worse than or simply different from others.

Referring to Bourdieu, Norton and Toohey (2003: 117) discuss how the value of speech affects the value assigned to a person. In a language tutorial context, where the act of speech is a principle aim, teachers need to be aware of the potential for tension and inequality. In line with Kress, Norton and Toohey (2003: 118) point out that theories of language cannot be developed separately from an understanding of social relationships and these are 'rarely constituted on equal terms'. Norton (2000: 8) also draws on Bourdieu to show that it is difficult to impose reception if we feel we are not treated on an equal footing in social terms. Yet we are expected to impose reception to achieve the academic outcomes for speaking development in many language courses.

How students engage with and perform in language classroom activities can be predicated on the translation from the psychological, linked to judgement, value and power, to the behavioural. There are several factors at stake: how individuals view themselves in the context, how they think others view them, how others behave towards them and ensuing reactions to their own behaviour. Any of these may lead to a modification of future behaviour. As we have discussed, conditioning exerts a powerful influence on some people and may cause the individual to revert to an entrenched pattern of behaviour, triggered by analogy from other domains of experience. Daly (1991: 5-6) points out that speech anxiety or communication apprehension arises because, in younger years, attempts to communicate were punished or received negatively or unpredictably. For students to lessen the negative impact on their classroom behaviour, they have to understand and manage their reactions. This challenge is illustrated in Morita's (2004: 589) study with many students not able to overcome 'ascribed identities', especially when imposed by more powerful group members such as instructors. Auerbach (2000: 144-156) refers to the inevitability of teachers holding powerful positions: '[It is their] conception of education that shapes how the learning community develops. [They have] their own goals, their own understanding of effective L2 pedagogy [ ... ]'. This has become known as 'teacher cognition' (Johnson, 2006: 236). Johnson (2006: 236) indicates that research in this area has helped to 'capture the complexities of who teachers are, what they know and believe, how they learn to teach and how they carry out their work in diverse contexts ...'. As Scribner (1985: 123) comments, if we take Vygotsky's position that sources of uniquely human behaviour are anchored in history, then the life

history of the teacher, particularly their educational history, may add to the challenge of reaching that meeting point between student and teacher which constitutes Bhaba's third space. This is particularly relevant in language teaching where teachers often come from other countries and are *positioned* (Hall, 1990) in a different educational, cultural and social context to the one in which they work. Duff and Uchida's (1997: 460) study into the link between teachers' sociocultural identities and teaching practices strengthens this view by indicating that their 'perceptions of their socio-cultural identity were [ . . . ] deeply rooted in their personal histories'. Another third space is therefore at work where the teacher's original culture meets the culture in which they now live.

Teachers also have their own understanding of how students should perform in speaking tasks. They may not realise that what they perceive as poor performance is in fact communication anxiety or represents a student choice not to participate (Horwitz *et al.*, 1996). As a consequence, students will judge themselves, or be judged by others, in a negative way. Daly confirms that this is likely to reinforce 'the expectation of a poor performance and contribute to even greater anxiety . . .' (Daly, 1991: 6). Often this is more prevalent in the distance setting given the diversity of the student body and the less frequent nature of face-to-face contact. Again the teacher's awareness and sensitivity levels are paramount.

In such situations, both agents have to open themselves up to the newness of the encounter and reject interference from pre-understandings.

A teacher cannot assume that a student with no formal qualifications, often the case with OU students as entry is not dependent on previous attainment, will be less able to manage their study. The student may in fact be highly self-educated and organised. Conversely, the teacher may wrongly assume that students with previous degrees need less help.

In one respect classrooms are no different from other social situations, where identity is regularly reconstructed through interaction. In the OU distance languages context, this process becomes more complex. The vagaries of the group mix, for example the arrival of a dominant or very competent student, who has not attended face-to-face before, can undermine the confidence and progress of other students and affect their ability to construct a new identity as language learner and group member. The unpredictability of each encounter could also result in the teacher's loss of confidence in their ability to manage the context. All this demands an additional layer of professionalism and skill from the distance language teacher as well as a more creative repertoire of techniques. In some cases, this can pose a psychological and emotional burden on conscientious teachers and we have encountered this in our own teams.

Where the teacher achieves successful outcomes, the process of identity reconstruction for students and indeed teachers is realised. The new identity impacts on the student's future as language learner and on the teacher's future role as facilitator. In its most advanced form it is a positive life-changing experience or 'an act of re-creation' (Ullman, 1997: 1). Norton (1997a: 426) refers to a Japanese speaker in McMahon's study whose learning of the other

language had empowered her to express herself in a way not possible in her mother tongue:

when speaking Japanese, it takes a lot of courage to express my convictions or insist upon my beliefs, but in English I can do so with a sense of being equal to the person I am talking to.

Here what May terms the 'language-in-culture' link is apparent, as the inextricable bond between linguistic and sociocultural practices results in changed behaviour through an acculturation process emerging specifically from language learning (May, 2000). For the Japanese student the expression of beliefs becomes associated with the learned language.

There is a built-in escape route for OU students who feel challenged or are ill-at-ease as tutorials are not compulsory. They can stop attending and revert to interaction with the course teaching materials and assignment feedback. In campus contexts, although feelings of alienation may be the same, non-attendance may not be an option. Here, the manifestation of escape may be non-participation in class (Morita, 2004).

### **Task Type and Identity: Issues of Sensitivity**

We identify four main areas where teachers need to exercise sensitivity and be aware of student sensitivities. First of all, advocates of the communicative method have focussed on personal information as the basis for activities (Klippel, 1994; Nunan, 1998). This has relied heavily on set pieces such as students' name, age, residence, family, marital status, job, hobbies and the like. Yet many students find this intrusive and giving rise to anxiety. Questions such as: 'Are you married?' or 'Do you have children?' or 'What is your job?' can be fraught for those who have experienced difficulties in these domains. At lower language learning levels it is argued that personal areas of discussion are inevitable as the language available to students is not wide-ranging enough to do otherwise (Klippel, 1984). At higher levels of language learning, there is less need for personal information, but students *are* required to express personal opinions. However, they are better equipped to manipulate the language and steer discussion in a way that suits them. This may explain why, at lower levels, students with insufficient linguistic knowledge and skill revert to their own language as a safety mechanism or employ diversionary tactics, for example looking in their dictionary unnecessarily to minimise eye contact and the need to speak.

The questions asked in such activities rely on historic conventions to capture a person's identity: the nuclear family, traditional relationships and lifestyles. Despite the encouragement of more tolerant attitudes, entrenched views still prevail in parts of society, so overtly personal questions can reveal differences which cause conflict. If students do want to talk about a 'non-conventional' lifestyle, the task structure, lexis and language functions encountered may not equip them to do so. Also, tasks of this type do not provide students with sufficient opportunity to develop a full range of expression. They may undermine student creativity, denying students the freedom to adopt roles

or to invent fictitious details for the sake of language learning, rather than reveal verbatim truths about themselves. This presupposes, of course, that what is not at stake is truth as an endpoint in itself, and that students are made to feel comfortable with this.

Although Klippel (1984: 7) suggests that ‘... to avoid any kind of embarrassment or ill feeling, the teacher should say that anyone may refuse to answer a personal question without having to give any reason or explanation’, this is problematic for adult learners. It requires confidence and involves taking the risk of creating an impression which one may not want to give. Neither does the student want to reveal the information demanded. A cleft stick is created and the student may stop participating or not attend again. Some teachers may view this refusal as a deficit on the student’s part. Others, whose heightened awareness allows them to understand the difficulty encountered in the third space, will take the focus away from that student’s dilemma and resolve it without threat or fear.

Secondly, the manner in which the task is conducted is important. Total physical response (TPR) has been vaunted as a good way of embedding language, as physical activity helps the individual to lose self-awareness and be less inhibited about language production. This may involve catching an object to indicate it is your turn to speak or moving around on a particular cue. While this may work with most if not all children, many adults are not comfortable with physical activity. They have issues with movement or co-ordination or have no experience of this in the educational setting. They may feel shy in the group or uncomfortable with their body. Yet, as students, they are expected to concur as this is deemed best for their language improvement. In the worst scenario, the latter point may not have been explained to them so they see no rationale for what they are expected to do, as well as feeling deprived of choice. In the OU context, they may have travelled miles to get to the tutorial, be in a room with people they don’t know and may not have been in a classroom for many years. One should not be surprised that some students give up because someone asks them to catch a bean bag in order to speak! This underlines the need for teachers to exercise judicious methodological choice.

If students are used to the language learning culture they can adapt more readily. They know the rules of the game and are able to play without damage to their sense of worth. It is important that teachers check students’ knowledge of the context and determine which activities cause no discomfort as student motivation and objectives play a major part in tutorial engagement. Resistant students are less likely to learn. Teachers need to communicate and negotiate the validity of their practice norms and their link to successful language acquisition. Good teacher management and staff development should ensure that such aspects are to the fore.

Thirdly, group management is pertinent. Student-centred methodology has encouraged pair and group work as the core of task management. The control of such activities is much more in the students’ hands. This removes the set pattern of teacher input, which students may have experienced in previous class-based contexts. It may challenge their traditional view of classroom dynamics. This is brought into greater relief at OU tutorials, where the prime



purpose is facilitation of learning (principally in speaking skills), and not teaching *per se*.

The issue of 'communication apprehension' (Daly, in Horwitz & Young, 1991; Daley, 1999) arises again, this time as a result of methodological strategy. The language learning context, particularly speaking, can intensify the level of anxiety and replicate behaviour patterns exhibited in other stressful communicative situations. Daly outlines a number of variables which underpin such anxiety such as constant evaluation, unfamiliarity or ambiguity in the situation, conspicuousness and prior history (Daly, 1991). We also suggest, in line with Horwitz *et al.* (1991), that communicative anxiety arises when the individual feels that they are unable to express their true self in the foreign language. They maintain that this is different from academic anxieties associated with mathematics or science and that 'Probably no other field of study implicates self-concept and self-expression to the degree that language study does' (Horwitz & Young, 1991: 31).

Communicative, group and student-centred methods may also challenge students' view of the teacher as an authority figure and make them re-evaluate their own identity as a learner. If a student's identity from a different learning environment impinges on his/her identity as a learner in the present, there may be a conflict. They may participate less, feel uncomfortable, out of control or worried that peers are leading rather than the teacher. In addition, there is no respite from having to perform, no opportunity to hide. All flaws are there for the revealing.

Whilst pair and small group work is meant to create the security in which students practise language in a smaller unit, the close social interaction is problematic for some. They may find themselves with an aggressive or painfully shy student and not have the confidence to deal with that. The teacher may not be available to intervene if working with another small group. While many would contend that this is reflective of life in general, we argue that the language learning context is not 'life in general' and that such scenarios have to be managed with care.

Workplace practices have developed to include techniques used in recent teaching methodologies, group work being, for example, a common feature of team building and personal and staff development. These methods are also used in voluntary organisations, in community building and in schools. The idea of working quietly at a desk on an individual task is less prevalent. This may make pair and group working in language tutorials easier for those who can transfer skills from other contexts. However, those who have not worked for some time may not be familiar with such techniques and find them daunting and tiring.

Lastly, communicative methodology has advocated that teachers use target language as the classroom *lingua franca*. We contend that this is one area of safety for students whose identity may be at issue. It can act as a leveller in that comprehension depends purely on target language competence with little interference from other social or educational factors, such as mother tongue accent, lexis, phrasing and intonation. Complex instructions using sophisticated lexis in the mother tongue may indeed be more daunting for some students than simple target language instructions.

## The Third Space: Making It a Safe Haven

### The student perspective

Fougère (2003: 13) maintains that 'the third space should allow for individuals to redefine themselves in relation to the new, other meanings they encounter'. The challenge is to create an environment in which safe movement in and out of a third space is possible.

Research, as discussed by Morita (2004: 573–574), often distinguishes between a product and process oriented approach to academic socialisation, that is *what* learners need to know to participate competently (needs analysis) as opposed to *how* students are socialised. However, we argue that these are so closely interlinked they become one and the same. The following appear to be product-oriented: designing speaking activities to match the content of the course materials studied at home; reviewing the lexis and language functions needed; providing assistance in preparation for activities; and ensuring activity outcomes match course outcomes. However, they are all eminently crucial in making the student feel comfortable during the process. Only then will they be able to enter the third space without suffering from communication anxiety.

Teachers need to let students know, in advance of tutorials, how they plan to run the group.<sup>1</sup> At the tutorial, teachers should make overall objectives clear so that the student has a clear sense of orientation, both linguistically and psychologically (Horwitz, 1988; Onwuegbuzie *et al.*, 1999: 232). It is particularly important at the first encounter, where physical aspects like travel to a place you don't know or being in a building which feels strange figure more prominently. OU students may have extra stress compared to those regularly attending a local institution they know well. These factors can cause students to lose valuable tutorial time while they adjust to the environment and they heighten the sense of who we are and how we cope.

During each activity there should also be an indication of outcome. The teacher should undertake regular reviews of how students are reacting to the activity and interacting with each other. If the task appears to put students in an uncomfortable position, the teacher should be flexible enough to adapt or abandon the task legitimising these feelings of anxiety, as Onwuegbuzie *et al.* (1999: 232) point out.

Offering a choice of tasks or showing students different ways of doing a task allows them to feel comfortable. A shared analysis of their ability to deal with a variety of strategies they have been encouraged to try out will allow them to adopt what best suits them (Nicolson *et al.*, 2005: 43–47). This will also free up the learner generally to make appropriate decisions in other learning situations.

Task design should ensure that students are free to reveal those aspects of themselves they wish to reveal, not what the teacher or other students want. Activities may then have to transcend the commonplace and be more open-ended to free up language production and create choice in a more imaginative and memorable way, humour often being a key ingredient. Where real engagement takes place, the whole mind will be absorbed with no interference from inhibition or self-awareness. At this point learners will be most open to new experience, new language and better communication and learning.

## **Teacher perspective**

It can be a challenge for teachers to deliver a tutorial and to capture a multiplicity of student expectations both expressed and unexpressed. A key endeavour consists of finding the meeting point between differing sets of expectations so that they do not have a negative effect on the student's or teacher's perception of themselves and on how they behave or feel. Teachers, as insiders of the language teaching community, must be in a position to challenge their own viewpoints and assumptions. Drawing on Buttimer's (1980: 172) understanding of the insider's ways of experiencing, there is a likelihood that teachers become so immersed in the particulars of everyday teaching practice in other settings 'that s/he may see no point in questioning the taken-for-granted ...'.

We draw the conclusion that continuous professional development (CPD) is crucial, to discuss practice and to address difficulties the teacher may encounter with the high level of flexibility and sensitivity required. The teacher also needs to be aware of different behaviour conventions. But, even more crucial, we argue, is that CPD should encourage and enable teachers to think of the classroom as a 'site of professional learning' (Johnson, 2006: 243). 'Within it teachers can engage in a cycle of self-reflection followed by implementation of newly found awareness and cognition based on self-directed, collaborative, inquiry-based learning' (Johnson, 2006: 243). This will enable the learning community to achieve a freedom of opportunity to engage healthily and confidently with the third space.

## **Conclusion**

To return to Guangwei (2002: 93), his focus on conflicts regarding philosophical assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning, perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of teachers and students, learning strategies encouraged and qualities valued in teachers and students hold for any classroom situation and demonstrate the need for '... a cautiously eclectic approach and ... well-informed pedagogical choices ... grounded in an understanding of sociocultural influences' (Guangwei, 2002: 93).

Howard (1996: 14) takes a similar line: 'If we are to view language teaching from a social, cultural, political and historical perspective ... we must accept and encourage a multi-methodological approach in language education. It may also be necessary to question our assumptions that language education has no goals besides communicative competence'.

Societal changes and the resulting diversity of expectations and needs undoubtedly require the adult distance teacher to be creative and responsive and it is also the HE institution's responsibility to foster creativity and responsiveness amongst its teaching staff.

The third space may be created without people knowing it is there. But ensuring that it becomes neither no-man's land nor enemy territory is a key role for the responsive teacher in the adult distance context. 'Critical approaches to language education will require commitment to social transformation, justice and equality ...' (Norton & Toohey, 2003: 15) All of these are

laudable aims for those of us working with language students and teachers in the adult distance context.

## Correspondence

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## Note

1. The teacher–student relationship at the OU is the crux of the operation, with the teacher seen by students as the face of the OU. Students are assigned to a specific teacher for the duration of the course, with the teacher marking and, more importantly, giving extensive feedback on their assignments in a variety of forms. The teacher is their first point of contact for all matters and also supports the individual student with queries or problems, referring them on to the OU support network as necessary.

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