

# Reconstructing miscommunications for the language classroom

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*Miscommunications appear to offer powerful L2 learning opportunities. In particular, they often arouse emotions that facilitate event recall, and may motivate learners by providing implicit evidence of the communicative importance and personal relevance of underlying language features. This article reports on a pedagogical approach to utilizing learners' miscommunications, and illustrates how communicative problems can become the basis of effective micro-lessons that highlight the often complex ways in which elements of the language system combine to create meaning. Miscommunication also provides a suitable platform to introduce the mechanisms of repair, through which learners can better manage communicative difficulties. Suggestions are made for how to establish a miscommunication focus in lessons.*

## Introduction

Many L2 speakers report their most striking and vivid language learning experiences to have involved a miscommunication or cultural *faux pas*. In unpublished interview and focus group data collected as a preliminary to this project, a recurrent theme in such experiences was an interaction involving an initially inexplicable turn of events, and the realization that a rupture had occurred between the intended meaning and its interpretation. On occasion, an addressee or over-hearer immediately identified the problem, but, at other times, the learner sought the help of a language informant or tucked this experience away, repeatedly probing and re-examining it for possible triggers (i.e. factors that contributed to the problem). Unlike many occurrences of error correction, these narratives suggested that such experiences can become highly salient memories that guard against taking the same missteps in future. In these preliminary data, one such case hinged on the often rather trivial difference between Spanish masculine (-o) and feminine (-a) nouns: a female native-speaker (NS) English teacher working in Mexico described attending a fancy dress party dressed as 'Zorro', or as she unfortunately told guests, *Zorra* (a highly derogatory term). Realizing this some days later, this Spanish learner became intrigued by the sometimes unexpected connotations created by grammatical gender marking, an area of grammar that she

had previously considered to be a rather dull and innocuous matter of morphological agreement.

Similar experiences are commonplace and it seems that at least three factors probably contribute to the effectiveness of miscommunications as a learning experience. First, they involve the language, messages, and contexts that the L2 user is grappling with at that time. In other words, the underlying language learning point is demonstrably relevant to the learner and has not yet been mastered. This likely creates conditions for heightened learner motivation (see [Dörnyei 2001](#): 24–5). Second, the miscommunication itself makes the communicative importance of the language point clear. When learners successfully express complex ideas, attention to strict grammatical correctness can seem rather pedantic, but when an error triggers miscommunication, its importance seems assured. Third, and perhaps most importantly, miscommunications can involve both cognitive and emotional effects that may facilitate learning. Specifically, miscommunications may be embarrassing, representing a face threat both to the speaker, who desires to be understood as intended, and to the hearer, who stands to be corrected ([Tzanne 2000](#): 194); events associated with heightened emotions such as embarrassment are often amongst the easiest to recall ([Medina 2007](#)), thereby making them available for later inspection. Indeed, [Cui \(2013\)](#) has reported on language learners mentally replaying and agonizing for months over seemingly trivial misunderstandings and communicative breakdowns. Such experiences may therefore promote the noticing of the linguistic or paralinguistic triggers of miscommunication, or failing that, at least the creation of an easily recoverable memory for further analysis.

Although the learning opportunities provided by these experiences may be powerful, it seems that few attempts have been made to systematically harness their pedagogic value. This may seem a surprising claim given that a great deal of research assumes that communicative problems spur L2 development, for example by prompting the use of interactional strategies for negotiating meaning (for instance repetition and clarification requests) which are thought to lead to increased comprehension and noticing ([Long 1996](#)). However, it appears that such approaches generally give priority to re-establishing shared understanding and highlighting the correct target language forms; what is typically overlooked is the potential of the miscommunication itself to be an object of closer enquiry.

Where the analysis of miscommunications has been most frequently reported is in the initial consciousness-raising phases of lessons focusing on speech acts, such as compliment-giving (for example [Eslami-Rasekh 2005](#)). Among the few to have promoted a closer focus on miscommunication is [LoCastro \(2010\)](#), who presents tasks based on collections of critical incidents, in which learners discuss pragmatically appropriate and inappropriate utterances. These approaches generally rely on selections compiled by the teacher and focus on issues of cross-linguistic acceptability, implicature, and pragmatic force. What tends to be ignored are the learners' own experiences of miscommunication

## Methods and participants

and problems that occur at other levels of understanding, specifically the phonetic, syntactic, lexical, and semantic levels, and even at further pragmatic levels such as topic and relevance.

With such issues in mind, I began an action research project (Wallace 1998) aimed at incorporating an effective miscommunication focus into my teaching. This involved trialling a range of techniques over two semesters with intermediate/upper-intermediate EAP classes, from which teacher reflections were recorded and used as a basis for improved classroom practice.

The participants in these classes were from North- and South-East Asia, Africa, and Europe and ranged in age from 18 to over 60. Some had been living permanently in New Zealand for up to five years, while others had recently arrived as international students. The participants studied in classes of between 17 and 24 students.

Initially, I included lessons based on the use of teacher-designed tasks that made misunderstandings transparent (for example following instructions to complete a drawing), from which learners were prompted to identify the miscommunication triggers and then to reformulate them appropriately. However, an early observation was that a potential source of more diverse, complex, and interesting miscommunications was the learners' ordinary daily life. In response, an approach was trialled in which miscommunications would be noted by students and then reconstructed for the class (usually as a 'live' scripted performance). The class would examine the reconstruction to identify and discuss possible miscommunication triggers. Where appropriate, this was followed by instruction that focused on relevant language features or social factors.

As this pedagogical approach became more settled, over the next two semesters I conducted a follow-up phase of reflection and analysis. The purpose was to explore ways in which the miscommunication lesson focus might offer learning opportunities, and whether this was justified given the 'cost' of up to 30 minutes of class time per week. In this phase, I made audio and video recordings of lesson segments in which participating students contributed miscommunications and/or joined in the resulting discussions. Over two semesters, this included segments from 28 lessons at intermediate and upper-intermediate levels involving 18 participants. From the classroom recordings, 11 miscommunications were identified as appearing to have sparked particularly fruitful discussion. These were analysed more closely to identify possible learning opportunities, particularly where equivalent experiences were deemed unlikely to have arisen from the class textbook and other 'regular' materials.

In setting up the next phase of the project, a miscommunication focus was formally introduced to lessons through a small bank of real-life examples that had been collected from colleagues. For instance one involved a student bringing an inedible mushroom to one of her classes; when she showed it to the teacher, he mistook her intended act of 'showing an object' to be one of 'offering food'. After admiring

it, he ate. By reconstructing the dialogue, the opportunity arose to highlight some of the subtle differences between the speech act of casually offering items (for example ‘Would you like to try one?’) and other presentational acts (for example ‘Have a look at this’). Students were then asked to contribute for discussion their own experiences of miscommunication.

Having established the potential value of examining miscommunications, it was announced that this would be a minor focus of classes for the semester. As homework, students were asked to keep a journal of miscommunications and other problems in expressing or interpreting meaning in class and in daily life. They were also encouraged to remain alert for miscommunications in class, and either bring attention to them immediately or make a note in their journal. The use of journals is an established method of collecting miscommunication data (for example Tzanne op.cit.), suited to the unpredictable and sometimes infrequent occurrence of suitable episodes. In this case, learners were advised to transcribe from memory what was said as soon as possible after the event, to note how it was interpreted, and to record any relevant contextual details. These entries usually contained fewer than 100 words and usually reported only the student’s perspective. Students could choose to share their entries with the class, with me as teacher/researcher, or with no one.

Journal entries became the basis for scheduled weekly discussions, in which learners were arranged in small groups and asked to give an oral recount of any communicative problems they had encountered or observed during the preceding week. These oral recounts typically contained substantially richer detail than the actual journal entries. As the teacher, I monitored these discussions to identify promising cases for further full class discussion. On occasion, this involved filtering out episodes in which the learner had evidently misheard key utterances or was in some other way unable to give a clear account of the interaction. Upon identifying a promising case, I then worked with the student to reconstruct the incident for the class. This involved specifying as precisely as possible what was said, any relevant contextual details (including the speakers and location), the learner’s interpretation, and the reaction of the other party. The class then discussed the incident, seeking to identify the triggers of miscommunication and to consider ways that successful communication could have been achieved.

Before continuing, it is worth noting that miscommunications are only a small subset of those problematic sequences that are focused on in numerous studies examining the negotiation of meaning (a recent overview is provided by [Goo and Mackey 2013](#)). Miscommunications involve a ‘situation in which the recipient understands the message in a different way than it was intended by the speaker’ ([Mustajoki 2012: 218](#)) and are distinguishable from other situations in which interactants interrupt the flow of discourse to deal with form-focused repairs or, for instance, correcting other false beliefs. Of primary interest to the teaching focus discussed here is the subset of miscommunications involving *misunderstanding*, whereby an addressee settles on a *wrong*

## Classroom-based miscommunications

interpretation of an utterance, rather than cases of *non-understanding* and *non-hearing*, for instance.

To illustrate the pedagogical use of classroom-based miscommunications, this section focuses on an example involving me (the teacher/researcher) and a Thai student. The class was preparing for a group presentation on pollution as a global issue. An extended miscommunication occurred between a student and myself, which took a number of turns to repair. After the miscommunication, we re-enacted what had happened and video recorded it. Extract 1, below, shows the utterance that triggered the extended miscommunication (as it appeared in the reconstruction). (See [Appendix](#) for transcription conventions used.)

Extract 1 (S = student; T = teacher/researcher)

- S: After Jeff [a peer] says solution, can he say #two #thumbs #up?  
[student makes thumbs up gesture]
- T: [pause] umm what do you mean?
- S: Um, like instead of the word conclusion, say #two #thumbs #up?
- T: [pause] mmm, can you give me the whole sentence? What will he say?

My initial interpretation was that the expression ‘two thumbs up’ was being suggested by the learner as a way for her partner Jeff (a pseudonym) to offer a positive evaluation on the group’s solution for global warming. In the context of an academic presentation, I had doubts as to whether this would be appropriate in terms of register and even whether it would be coherent. A series of further turns followed as I tried to clarify this before realizing that the student was actually saying ‘to sum up’.

The video extract was subsequently viewed as a whole-class activity, and with due care and tact, the learners unpacked the triggers of the miscommunication. Without assistance, the learners were able to identify a combination of these miscommunication triggers.

- 1 Acoustic similarities between /s/ and /θ/ and the learner’s accent.
- 2 Use of stressed rather than unstressed ‘to’ (i.e. /tu/ rather than /tə/).
- 3 The two-handed thumbs-up gesture coinciding with ‘to sum up’.

In relation to pronunciation, repeated listening revealed that the speaker’s production of ‘sum’, while not quite native-like, certainly appeared to have an initial sound that was substantially closer to /s/ than it was to /θ/. Indeed, Thai has an equivalent or near-equivalent for the former but not the latter ([Smyth 2001](#)).<sup>1</sup> What was also apparent was that the speaker did not pronounce any final -s on ‘sum/thumb’, yet I had recalled it as ‘thumbs’. This suggested that non-auditory factors played a role in hearing a recognizable attempt at /sʌm/ as /θʌms/. The most influential factor therefore appeared to be the thumbs-up gesture, despite not being inappropriate in

any obvious way. Thus, in the course of trying to make sense of the utterance, I had misinterpreted the relationship between the utterance and the gesture (i.e. the gesture was not intended to demonstrate the meaning of 'to sum up', but to ask whether it was appropriate), and I had evidently mentally 'over-corrected' for the learner's accent, most probably due to familiarity with the problem many Thai students face pronouncing /θ/.

Individually, none of the three triggers was likely to represent unknown aspects of English for the students (unlike, for instance, the earlier inedible mushroom example). Nevertheless, students expressed considerable surprise that these factors could actually trigger miscommunication. The subsequent teacher-led discussion focused particularly on revising the use of unstressed structure words, and the incident may also have reinforced the importance of distinguishing /s/ from /θ/. Further discussion focused on the observation that, as in this instance, many miscommunications probably contain a constellation of several apparently trivial factors interacting in unexpected ways to trigger larger problems (as illustrated in [Ryan and Barnard 2009](#)). Although this could dishearten some learners, raising awareness of such complexity actually appeared to encourage many students, perhaps by prompting re-evaluation of previously embarrassing communication failures. Even more reassuring may be recognition that the L1 hearer may not be blameless, and might actually play a key role in co-constructing some misinterpretations.

While this particular instance of miscommunication was triggered by a learner's utterance, misinterpretations of NS English were also frequently raised in lessons and were also pedagogically useful. As students became accustomed to the routine of noting miscommunications, they often seemed to become highly alert to information that appeared odd or confusing, and perhaps more willing to seek clarification from their interlocutors. Miscommunications were also reported from student–student interactions, although perhaps fewer than might have been expected.

Use of the miscommunication journals was also extended to situations in which no actual miscommunication occurred but the learner identified difficulties in expressing meaning or achieving a task (for example 'How do you ask a visitor to take off their shoes?'). This was originally intended to capture problems that occurred outside the classroom, yet students frequently recorded issues from the classroom. In teacher–class interaction, the success of using the journals for this purpose may be related to the tightly controlled exchange structure of much classroom discourse, in which teachers initiate, students respond, and the teacher provides feedback ([Waring 2009](#)). Waring (*ibid.*) illustrates some of the difficulties for learners in raising questions or making other types of contribution during such sequences. A further issue seems to occur during some fluency-based activities, where there may be limited opportunity for students to confirm the language needed to express their meaning.

## Reconstructing miscommunications from outside the classroom

As mentioned, the richest source of miscommunications involved events outside the classroom, such as service encounters and interactions with host families. In many cases, students presented examples in which they sensed that they had been talking at cross purposes, yet could not identify the specific problem. The resolution of such miscommunications occasionally appears to have significant social implications for the learners. In one such case, a mature international student who was staying with a host family arrived in class clearly anxious and unsettled by an incident from the previous evening. Her host mother had been serving dinner, and the learner tried to indicate her plate was sufficiently full. However, the host mother responded with a look of irritation and served her an even bigger portion. The learner could not identify what had gone wrong ('Was she offended?') or why ('Does she think I don't like her cooking?'). In a reconstruction of the incident, as the student gestured her hands backwards and forwards, saying 'more enough, more enough', both the triggers and the homestay mother's interpretation became clear to the class. The learner's emphasis on 'more' and the 'towards me' gesture appeared to be a demand for extra food. Other students suggested that her intended meaning may have been best expressed in English with 'that's plenty' and a palms-outward (stop) gesture; subsequent discussion led to the introduction of alternatives such as 'that's more than enough'.

Most importantly for this individual, confirmation of the miscommunication enabled her to positively reassess the host mother's response, and she could then set about repairing the image she wished to present to her hosts and address any ill feeling on their behalf. For the class in general, many of whom lived with host families, the discussion highlighted a speech act that few seemed to have mastered, highlighted cross-cultural differences in the use of gestures, and also touched on issues of prosody. On reflection, an opportunity may also have been missed to explore how apparently semantically empty words such as 'that', 'is', and 'than' could transform the apparently inappropriate 'more enough' into the more appreciative 'that's more than enough' (similarly, 'come here' may be heard quite differently to 'come over here'). However, perhaps more important than any particular language focus was the social and psychological value that may be gained from this approach to exploring problematic cross-cultural interactions. Specifically, this was one of several miscommunications in which interactants had become anxious or upset due to what seemed a bewildering reaction from the other party; working through such examples highlights the value of investigating such incidents before assuming the worst.

## Miscommunication and repair

The discussion so far has focused on the learning opportunities that miscommunications provide. However, they also provide opportunities to develop the skills required to deal with conversations gone awry. To illustrate this, one further example is presented in Extracts 2 and 3 below. With reference to her journal, a student reported being perplexed by an incident at a social welfare office: in order to receive additional funds, the official insisted that she had to 'save' money; the student responded

that it was impossible to save money when she received too little to live on in the first place. A long sequence of miscommunication reportedly ensued. The learner sensed that they were perhaps talking at cross purposes, but was unable to resolve the issue and felt exasperated by her case worker's apparent unreasonableness. When discussed in class, the miscommunication appeared to hinge on the interactants' different uses of the word 'save': the officer apparently meant for her to 'reduce costs' but the student was only familiar with save in the sense of 'saving money in the bank'. Such lexically based triggers of miscommunication are rather mundane in themselves, but the non-resolution of this problem proved to be an effective lead in to the issue of repair practices (see [Kitzinger 2013](#)). The speaker had identified something wrong with this part of the interaction but was unable to specify which particular word or even utterance was to blame; the mechanisms of repair provide for these not only at discourse-level confusion, but also for more tightly focused enquiries. By reconstructing parts of the dialogue and locating the point of breakdown with students (lines 1–3), it was possible to introduce suitable mechanisms of repair (lines 4 and 6) and demonstrate how the issue could have been resolved (lines 5 and 7).

Extract 2 (A = welfare officer; S = student)

Reconstruction and intervention 1

Turn sequence	Line no.	Speaker	Utterance
Original miscommunication	1	A:	Have you saved money since last time?
	2	S:	I can't save money. I don't have enough. That's why I came here.
	3	A:	You first need to show me that you are taking steps to save money.
Repair 1	4	S:	Pardon?
Likely response	5	A:	You need to show me that you're saving money.
Repair 2	6	S:	Saving money?
Likely response	7	A:	Spending less.

In this version of the reconstruction, the proposed intervention with 'Pardon' in line 4 was likely to elicit a repetition of the problematic utterance, while the partial repeat in line 6 focused specifically on one element of the utterance as being in need of clarification (Kitzinger *ibid.*). In the second reconstruction below (Extract 3), speaker S voices her interpretation of A's meaning, laying this open for A to either accept or to modify it (line 5).



Extract 3 (A = welfare officer; S = student)

Reconstruction and intervention 2

- 1 A: Have you saved money since last time?
- 2 S: I can't save money. I don't have enough. That's why I came here.
- 3 A: You first need to show me that you are taking steps to save money.
- 4 S: Save money in the bank?
- 5 A: Uhh, no, I mean start spending less money.

Teaching these mechanisms of repair could help equip learners with the tools to deal with miscommunications and other breakdowns in conversation. Associated teaching ideas are presented by [Wong and Waring \(2010\)](#), including awareness-raising tasks based on L1 data and role plays based on correcting misunderstandings.

## Conclusion and further reflections

Learner narratives indicate that miscommunication can be a powerful stimulus for learning, yet there appear to be few published accounts of systematic attempts to structure teaching around the opportunities that miscommunications provide. The present action research project explored the potential of using learner miscommunication journals, from which incidents could be reconstructed in the classroom and analysed with learners. Opportunities arose to take advantage of the heightened motivation of the learner who experienced the miscommunication, help them make sense of confusing events, and (on occasion) provide grounds on which to repair relationships and solve other problems. In relation to the class as a whole, there were opportunities to highlight the evident communicative relevance of the language features involved, to collaboratively analyse meaning-creation in memorable ways, and to consider language that was demonstrably relevant to learner needs but which might otherwise not have been addressed in the programme.

Implementing such a focus does, however, provide challenges. The occurrence of miscommunications is unpredictable and there may be variation in the ability and willingness of learners to share these in class. Furthermore, some miscommunications may hinge on a single word or pronunciation issue and may therefore be of limited value as an object of further discussion. In the classes discussed here, this meant that in some weeks, students had little to examine and so alternative teaching material was required. This was partly addressed in these classes by embedding the miscommunication focus within a more inclusive focus on 'communication issues'.

The miscommunications that generated the most class discussion tended to be rather complex in terms of contextual background, what was said, and what was interpreted. As such, for less competent English users (perhaps low-intermediate and below), use of their L1 may be the only effective way of eliciting an adequately descriptive account.

Another consideration for teachers is how to manage the face-threatening nature of miscommunication. Students may wish to present an image of themselves as successful learners, and they could feel that this is threatened by evidence of communicative problems. It therefore seemed important to develop trust and rapport with students before establishing this lesson focus, and thereafter to proceed tactfully and to show appreciation for any miscommunication contributed.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> This also suggests that the learner had probably not substantially adjusted her pronunciation between the original conversation and the reconstruction.

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## Appendix

Transcription conventions used

[roman]

speaker attribution or non-timed pause

[italics]

researcher comment on other observed behaviour

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misheard word