

THE ACQUISITION OF GAMBITS BY CLASSROOM FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS OF INDONESIAN

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A learner trying to acquire communicative competence in a second or foreign language must become both linguistically competent by mastering the grammar of the language and pragmatically competent by learning to use the language appropriately (Thomas, 1983). One measure of pragmatic competence is the learner's ability to use pragmatic formulas appropriately (Schmidt, 1993). This paper will focus on the acquisition of one particular type of pragmatic formula, gambits, by beginning learners of Indonesian in a foreign language classroom.

The term *gambit* in its linguistic sense was coined independently at about the same time by Keller (Keller & Taber Warner, 1976) and Edmondson (1977) to refer to those formulaic expressions whose primary role is strategic rather than propositional in nature; they serve to guide the hearer through the discourse by semantically framing propositional information (e.g., *The main point is*), by facilitating turn exchanges (e.g., *May I interrupt for a moment?*), and by marking discourse boundaries (e.g., *That's all I have to say about that*). These functions facilitate the comprehension process for the hearer, allowing him or her to use top-down strategies in discourse processing. Because of their nature and the functions they serve, the acquisition of gambits is of interest both sociolinguistically and psycholinguistically. In this paper, gambits will be discussed from a sociolinguistic perspective, a psycholinguistic perspective, and in terms of the problems they present for foreign language learners.

A Sociolinguistic Perspective

One important sociolinguistic function of gambits is that they serve to enhance politeness in interactions in several ways. While gambits do not necessarily contain social messages designed to increase face-support (such as compliments do) or to reduce face threat (such as supportive moves in requests do) (Held, 1989), they are nevertheless polite because they facilitate conversational management and information processing (Edmondson & House, 1981). Politeness, according to Fraser (1990), is doing what is appropriate for the situation; it involves

mutual cooperation of the interlocutors. Each participant demonstrates consideration for the others by abiding by the terms of a conversational contract, thereby doing what is expected of them by the other interlocutors. As mentioned earlier, the use of gambits is hearer supportive; they make it easier for the hearer to process the discourse by providing them with opportunities for top-down processing. Therefore, when gambits are not used appropriately in the expected places, their non-use or inappropriate use can be seen as nonsupportive. The processing load on the hearer is increased, and the speaker is likely to be viewed as uncooperative and impolite (Edmondson & House, 1981).

Gambits also serve a politeness function in that they can be used to encode social status indirectly, which in many cases would be considered impolite if directly encoded. This is done by simultaneously encoding a social message indirectly along with a more direct propositional message. Keller (1981) provides an example: The gambit, *Here's what we'll do*, can simultaneously signal the speaker's wish to keep the turn, state a plan for action, and assert a position of leadership.

That gambits serve a politeness function is evident in that their use typically increases when the speaker is imposing on or disagreeing with the hearer. Research in conversational analysis has demonstrated that hesitators (e.g., *well*, *um*) are more frequent in dispreferred responses (e.g. rejections of offers, disagreements with assertions). These hesitator gambits are not meaningless speech production errors, but signal social meaning (Davidson, 1984; Pomerantz, 1984).

Psycholinguistic Interest

Gambits are of interest from a psycholinguistic perspective for a number of reasons. Like other speech formulas, they offer insight into psycholinguistic processes such as fluency, automaticity, and noticing. Fluency in the speech of foreign language learners has been associated with automaticity. More automatic speech is more fluent (Schmidt, 1992). When speech is fluent, the psycholinguistic processes of speech planning and production are functioning easily and efficiently (Lennon, 1990). The use of speech formulas (including gambits) facilitates the fluent production of speech. The formula is learned, stored, and retrieved as a single unit or chunk. As such, it is produced in a steady stream of speech unmarked by hesitations and pauses (Pawley & Syder, 1983).

Since gambits and formulas are learned as chunks, they also add to the native-like quality of the learner's speech

because the appropriate sequences of words (i.e., the fixed formulas and lexicalized sentence stems) contribute to the appearance of competence in the language (Pawley & Syder, 1983). Conversely, when foreign language learners use a non-routinized sequence in a place where native speakers would use a routine formula, the speech calls attention to itself as non-native in quality (Edmondson, House, Kasper & Stemmer 1984). Learners who are able to utilize these series of chunks will give the appearance of fluency in the language, which will in turn provide them with more opportunities to converse with native speakers, thereby increasing (and perhaps improving) the quality of the input (Wong Fillmore, 1979). It would follow, then, that learners who have mastered some conversational gambits will give the appearance of fluency in the language.

Gambits, like other speech formulas, occur with greater frequency than more unique and creative utterances. As a result, they can be produced automatically. However, their automatic quality and their low propositional content make them less cognitively salient and more likely to go unnoticed (Verschueren, 1981; DuFon, 1992). Noticing is essential in order for pragmatic formulas (such as gambits) to be acquired (Schmidt, 1993). Therefore, gambits, even though they may occur frequently in the input, will not be acquired if they are not sufficiently perceptually salient to be noticed. Thus while gambit use may facilitate the development of fluency in the target language, the gambits themselves may be difficult to acquire because of their not being noticed by the learner.

Gambits in Language Learning

Even when noticed, however, appropriate use of gambits may not be easily acquired. The formulas themselves are relatively easy for learners to memorize (Davies, 1987), but even when a gambit appears to have an equivalent form in the target language, it may not be equivalent to the source language gambit in terms of its functional meanings or the contextual features related to its use. Learners typically begin to use formulas before they fully understand their functional meanings and relevant contextual features (Davies, 1987; Richards & Sukwiwat, 1983; Schmidt, 1993), and therefore are likely to err in gambit use even when the form itself has been mastered.

Studies of learners' use of gambits have indicated that gambits occur much less frequently in learners' interlanguage than in either the native language or the target language. Furthermore, there is much less variety in learners' gambit use as compared with that of native speakers. Rather learners tend

to overuse some gambits and underuse others. They adopt a few favorite gambits which they use extensively (even in situations where they are not appropriate) while they underuse other gambits. Some gambits do not appear in the learner's interlanguage even when there is a direct translation equivalent (Edmondson & House, 1981; Faerch & Kasper, 1984; Wildner-Bassett, 1984).

In summary then, gambits are speech formulas which serve to guide the hearer through the discourse. They are of interest sociolinguistically (because of their politeness value as hearer supportive devices) and psycholinguistically (because of their relationship to fluency, automaticity, and noticing). Even when noticed, they typically are problematic for the learner because of their nonequivalence in terms of form, functional meaning, and relevant contextual variables in the two languages.

To date, studies of gambit acquisition and use have involved Germanic languages--German, Danish, and English. This study, in contrast, will explore the acquisition and use of gambits by beginning level adult classroom learners of Indonesian as a foreign language. The gambits will be studied in terms of their forms, their functions, and the contextual variables related to their use. The following research questions will be addressed. 1) To what extent are gambits taught in the classroom? 2) How does student output compare with input in terms of gambit types, gambit length, frequency of use, and function?

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were a class of eighteen students enrolled in Indonesian 101 at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. Most were native speakers of various dialects of English (American, New Zealand, Singaporean); one student, however, was a native speaker of French. The class had been in session for about two months at the time of the data collection. The class met for fifty minutes five days per week. The students had little exposure to the Indonesian language outside of class, therefore it was assumed that most of their learning took place within the context of the class (i.e., the class itself, language laboratory work, and homework). On occasion, however, they did have opportunities to speak with native speakers of Indonesian outside of class. The Indonesian teachers usually organized several parties per semester; they invited students from Indonesia to these parties, in part so that the students of