A GROUNDED THEORY OF PERCEIVED TEACHER AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION: STUDENT IMPACTS

Brandon Donelson-Sims

Introduction and Literature Review

The communication styles of teachers, and more specifically the use of aggressive messages, remains an understudied area in EFL research. Many of us might relate, however, to the following anecdote (provided by a student writing a reflective journal about her 6th grade elementary school teacher):

“One day the teacher asked me a question, and I answered it hesitantly. I was not a good spokesperson, so I said my answer faltering. Hearing my stammer, the teacher spontaneously said, “You don’t need to talk any more crybaby.” Suddenly the class laughed at me and I never interacted with that teacher from that time on” (Donelson-Sims, 2012)

We can readily agree that the interaction with the teacher had a negative impact on the student. However, a robust theory of aggressive teacher communication should tell us why there was a negative impact, what other verbal or nonverbal messages would be perceived by the student as aggressive, and the types of negative impacts which could result. A robust aggressive communication theory would also seek to determine if there was a range of communication styles that were seen as more or less harsh, and if those more or less harsh messages impacted students differently. In my ongoing research on verbal aggressiveness, I seek to answer some of those questions.

My research seeks to establish an Indonesian-based theory explaining the impact on students when they perceive their teachers to be using aggressive communication. Previous research, conducted mostly in the United States, has found a number of negative effects on students when they perceive a teacher to be communicating in an aggressive manner. For example, students rate those teachers as less credible, competent, and caring (Edwards & Myers, 2007), less conversationally appropriate (Martin, Weber, & Burant, 1997), and less likable (Myers & Knox, 2000; Myers & Rocca, 2001). Student perception of instructor
aggressive communication has also been negatively correlated with student evaluations of the course and instructor, and student understanding of course material (Schrodt, 2003). Most importantly, studies have consistently shown a negative correlation between perceived instructor verbal aggressiveness and student participation inside the class and interaction with instructors outside of the class (Myers & Knox, 2001; Myers, Martin & Knapp, 2005; Myers et al., 2007). Unfortunately, to date, no major research projects have focused on teachers' aggressive communication outside of the United States.

For this research project, instead of importing or adapting the previously created theory of perceived teacher aggressiveness, I seek to develop a theory starting from the experiences of Indonesian students. In a previous quantitative research study of Indonesian students, I found mixed results in measuring perceived verbal aggressiveness and the impact on students (Donelson-Sims, 2012). With a sample size of 140 students, I found a statistically significant negative correlation between perceived instructor verbal aggressiveness and student participation in class ($r = -0.17$, $p<0.05$). However, for my sample of students the 10 question scale measuring perceived teacher verbal aggressiveness, which had been used in previous U.S. studies, had an internal reliability rating of only 0.60, which is quite low (Donelson-Sims, 2012). These results suggest that the concept and measurement of aggressive communication may differ in important ways in Indonesia.

To discover these differences and develop a contextually appropriate theory of aggressive communication in Indonesia, I will use grounded theory methodology. Grounded theory, a qualitative methodology, seeks to develop theory from empirical data instead of applying and testing an already developed theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory methods differ from other qualitative methods such as ethnography or case studies. In ethnography, the main goal of a research project is a dense description of a population group or setting. However, for ethnographers no attempt is made to explain causal relationships between categories or variables. In grounded theory, the goal is a clear theoretical model that relates various categories / concepts and shows how variables or contexts might cause effects or influences (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A further benefit of grounded theory is the emphasis on constant analysis and interpretation. The ideal is that initial data will be interpreted, leading to more detailed questions, which will then lead to later sampling strategies, more data collection, and eventually to theoretical

---

5 I will write in the first-person throughout this paper to highlight the crucial role of the researcher in grounded theory and to not obscure the necessary researcher role of interpreting and organizing data.
models (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This iterative process allows the research to test early assumptions and findings with later data, instead of collecting all the data at the beginning of the process and analyzing at the end of the project.

This paper serves two major purposes. First, to report on an ongoing grounded theory project exploring the development of an Indonesian-based theory of perceived teacher aggressive communication. I will explore what categories emerge out of the student data and how those categories relate and interact in a complex model. However, at this stage only a very introductory model will be introduced, and future steps in the project discussed. The second purpose of the paper is to discuss uses of the grounded theory method for developing culturally sensitive theories in the Indonesian education context. To serve this purpose, I will mention several of the early steps in the grounded theory process with examples from the aggressive communication project, and then discuss later possible stages of the project. Towards the end of the paper, I will show how grounded theory in different cultural contexts can yield new insights into theories developed in other cultural situations.

Currently Completed Phases of Study

Data Collection

As a primarily qualitative research method, the first question for a grounded theorist to answer involves the types of data to collect. This decision will be based primarily on the general research question, but could include in-depth interviews, recorded observations, researcher journals, focus groups, or even drawings and pictures (Creswell, 2007, 131). Since the main emphasis of grounded theory should be on actions and perspectives of the participants, in-depth interviews are the most common form of data collected (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For my research, in-depth interviews were the best method for collecting stories and experiences of students who have faced aggressive communication from teachers. Observations would be less helpful for the topic of perceived teacher aggressiveness because of the unpredictability of this form of communication and because my main interest lies in student perceptions and not my own interpretation of events.

Opportunistic and purposeful sampling are the initial strategies for finding participants in a grounded theory study (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). My initial data collection involved four in-depth interviews (each about one hour in length) with three female students and one male student. These students all belonged to a private Christian university English department and were chosen for their storytelling
abilities and their past experiences with teachers they perceived as using harmful or aggressive language. Two students attended the same middle and high school, allowing for comparisons of shared teachers. In addition, the students had attended a mix of public, private, and religious schools, allowing for variation among contexts (see Creswell, 2007, 127 for a discussion of maximum variation and homogeneous sampling strategies). Later in the paper I will describe theoretical sampling and confirming/disconfirming cases as the next stages of the grounded research project.

Following the advice of Charmaz (2006), and Strauss & Corbin (1998), I used an open-ended interview format that provided for following leads and hunches as they arose during the interview. Every effort was made to avoid academic and theoretical jargon in the questions, since those types of questions might have limited or constrained the participants in the sharing of their perspectives and experiences (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, instead of using the imported theoretical term perceived verbal aggressiveness, I used a range of synonyms such as harsh language, aggressive talk, hurtful behavior, etc. Later in the research process, student experiences will be converted into more abstract concepts related to perceived teacher communication styles and their impacts.

**Coding in Grounded Theory**

After an initial set of data has been gathered, grounded theorists should begin the process of coding and analyzing the data. In the initial coding process we researchers should be “open to exploring whatever theoretical possibilities we can discern in the data” (Charmaz, 2006), and we accomplish this task by “attaching meaning labels to segments of the data” (Charmaz, 2006). In this way, the “text (i.e. interview transcript) is opened up and broken apart for intensive scrutiny” (Corbin & Holt, 2004). For grounded theorists, the most common form of open coding, of breaking apart the text, is line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In line-by-line coding the researcher names each line of the written data (transcript) (Glaser, 1978) in order to better understand the actions involved, to question one's own assumptions and prejudgments, and to problematize the stories and viewpoints of participants.

I show below an example from the first interview I conducted. The codes for each line are in brackets.
Participant 1: Yeah, like, you got your homework done for example. Yeah, you will be very very safe in the classroom [*being compliant to gain safety*]. But actually besides that, his (the teacher) explanation is very clear. But the bad thing is his treatment toward some of his students who were naughty, like that [*describing teacher with positive and negative actions*]. My junior high school time was a little bit scary [*scared in Junior High*].

These initial codes are considered provisional but allowed for exposing processes and actions from the ground up, rather than imposing already developed categories upon the data. As we attempt to label the data, we ask sensitizing questions about the experiences portrayed in the data and search out other possible interpretations to explain what is happening (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These questions and thoughts can even be recorded as memos in the project so that the researcher can consider them later and will have a record of the research process. The following example comes from an interview participant discussing jokes made by his teacher that he did not think were aggressive or harsh:

"be a couple". There were two students who didn't bring their books. The one is male and the other one was, you know, female. "Just be a couple, because you guys didn't bring your book. Just be a couple."

As a researcher there might be a temptation to code these lines as an example of *non-harsh jokes* or a similar code. However, as I considered this code I wrote the following analytical memo:

The joke here was not directed at interviewee. Would the joke have been perceived differently if he was the target?

Sensitizing questions, such as in the memo above, help the researcher carefully consider the perspective being offered and build the most reliable initial codes. These initial codes can then be used in the development of a theory.

*Focused Coding and Data Analysis: Comparing and contrasting segments and incidents*

One benefit of this line-by-line coding is it allows for a comparative analysis between chunks of labeled data. Initial codes could be compared to similar codes within the same
interview and then between interviews, in order to later develop concepts and categories for the theory. For example, in the first interview extract in the previous section there seems to be a connection between finishing the homework and being safe from harsh language. I compared this to other data segments in the same interview and noticed multiple similar statements, such as:

“when you didn't do what he asked you to do, he would do bad things like that. But if you be a good student, be obedient student, he wouldn't do that. Just agree to what he wanted, just did what he wanted, that's the key.”

Noticing the similarities within this interview transcript, I wondered if there were similar occurrences in the other interviews. So, I did a key-word search across all the initial line-by-line codes from the four interviews and found the following list of initial codes: “being compliant to gain safety,” “compliance to teacher,” “gaining compliance,” obedience and silence to avoid harsh language,” “obedience to yelling,” “punishing to gain compliance,” “scared by yelling and obedient.” Seeing this recurrence as a possible category/concept (which will be explained in the next section), I went back to the original transcripts to compare the incidents involving these codes.

One participant discussed two incidents involving various types of harsh language (what follows are only short extracts from the incidents, not entire descriptions of each experience):

“He had a bad temper sometimes. And that was very scary...And we were very afraid of that teacher actually, so we just tended to be silent all the time in the classroom ,and then you know, we did whatever he asked us to do.

and

“We already know that he was very very cruel, something like that, so we played safe. We were silent all the time to avoid that thing to happen.”

Another participant shared similar incidents involving a teacher who yelled using harsh language:
"We respond with what she asks us to do. "Shut up!" - yeah we shut up. "Sit!" - yeah we sit, like that. So scary -yeah - elementary school.

Yet another incident involved what the participant described as harsh and humiliating language from a teacher upset by his noisy classroom:

“We were asked to come out and repeat that in the field, in the basketball field, really loud, "saya bukan babi, saya bukan kambing." ["I am not a pig, I am not a goat"]'). And the other classes like: “Ah, what are they doing?” That's how he punished us and some of us kind of giggle, like "hehehe, bukan babi." Then, "Jangan kertawa" [loud/imitating teacher]"[“Don’t laugh”]. “Oh! [making a frightened face and shaking] Saya bukan babi.”

After comparing these four incidents (and others) in the beginning stages of analysis, a tentative concept and connection emerged. Many times when the students discussed a teacher's use of harsh language or behavior, they also either implied or directly stated that they became more compliant and obedient to the teacher. At the same time, within each incident, there was conveyed a strong memory of fear on the part of individual students and a perceived sense of fear for the entire classroom atmosphere.

Developing Categories/Concepts, Axial Coding, and Tentative Theoretical Models

After the initial and focused coding stages, the next step of grounded theory is to develop and name categories, which are created from the ground-up using the codes and analysis already articulated. A category is a labeled abstract concept that is derived from the data itself, and not imposed from an outside, pre-determined understanding (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once a category has been tentatively identified within the data, the researcher attempts to define that category by understanding its properties (subcategories that help give shape and concreteness to the concept) and dimensions (such as more or less intense) through a process called axial coding (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher will then seek to discover how these various categories interact and relate to one another, thus moving from description to theorizing.

At this early stage in the aggressive communication project, I have identified several central categories with possible properties (see chart 1). These categories are tentative, but were developed using the comparative analysis method described in the previous section.
One main category that has emerged will be labeled *harsh language*, which is used to describe actions of the teachers from the perspective of my student participants. The problem, and key question for the next stages of the research project, is deciding what properties to include under harsh language and what to break off into distinct, but related, categories. At this stage, the following properties describe harsh language as revealed by the students: yelling and shouting at students, physically gesturing (such as pounding on tables), humiliating (such as calling students stupid or lazy), mocking or insulting, becoming unpredictably angry, cursing at students, embarrassing students in front of the class, ignoring students or pretending like they do not exist, comparing students to animals (such as talkative birds or noisy farm animals), and physically punishing (such as kicking, pulling ears, squeezing pressure points on shoulders, etc.).

Looking at this list of harsh communication, one obvious dilemma is whether or not these disparate items should all be grouped under one conceptually unified category. Based on the initial coding and analysis, they seem to operate in similar ways upon the students, in terms of fearful feelings and classroom impacts. In addition, some of the properties were mentioned by all participants and seem to surely belong within the category, such as mocking/insulting and yelling/shouting. Other properties were mentioned by several participants, such as comparing students to animals and physically punishing. One possibility to explain this list is that some of these properties could be separate, but related categories, such as physical punishment as distinct from harsh language/gestures. Another possibility is that certain of these properties are different dimensions of the same concept, and perhaps students may consider some of these acts as more intense, such as yelling and shouting, or less intense, such as intentionally ignoring. The answers to this question are not readily apparent in the initial data and we should avoid imposing our own preconceived notions about what types of communication are “really” harsh. Instead, in later stages of the study, theoretical questioning will be used to hopefully illuminate these interesting dilemmas.

Two other categories that evolved from the initial coding and analysis were labeled *classroom atmosphere* and *personal student feelings*. As could be seen in the representative responses quoted in the previous section, almost every time a student discussed an incident of a teacher using harsh language, their response included a remembered feeling of being scared and afraid (“so scary,” “that was very scary,” “I felt afraid”). Another participant mentioned being trained to fear public speaking because of potentially harsh language from teachers mocking her presentations: “I remember at that time I really nervous, really frightened,...like become Parkinson [shaking].” These examples are fear properties of the category *personal*
student feelings, and in terms of axial coding, seem to be caused by harsh language. Other properties of this category include feeling ignored:

“And I cannot...she [the teacher] usually like...alright you are, like you are not exist anymore in this class for the whole day. It's like yeah, when I become that student I usually felt not worthy. Like disappointment for myself....I feel sad.”

Notice the property of feeling ignored includes the intense personal emotions of sadness and lack of self-worth. Other discovered properties in this category were a developed lack of confidence, and feelings of humiliation. A final representative example from a student participant reveals this category of personal feelings in response to harsh language:

“Uh, I, my reaction was when the earth cracks open and I will jump and you have to close up ....[inaudible, laughs]. Like ahhhh, so embarrassed.”

However, besides the individual feelings component, there also seemed to be a shared classroom feeling or atmosphere created by the harsh language. This was shown in student responses such as “and we were very afraid of that teacher actually.” There was also an implied lack of safety with harsh teachers (such as, only if you finished your homework would you “be very safe in the classroom”). The two clear properties of a negative classroom atmosphere caused by harsh language are fear and a lack of safety. Future interviews and theoretical questioning will be used to further flesh out this category.

These two concepts, in turn, help to explain the potential impacts of harsh language. Two main classroom impacts of harsh language were identified as gaining compliance or obedience and lower participation or involvement in class. Rather than harsh language automatically causing a negative impact on the classroom, it seems to operate by proxy through the creation of a fearful, unsafe classroom atmosphere and by fostering negative personal feelings within students. In each compared incident within the four interviews, this chain of events seems to be common and consistent. The gaining compliance category includes student behaviors as varied as turning in assignments on time, answering questions correctly, ending noisy chatter, and following teacher instructions. Some examples of the lower participation in class category include being silent during discussion times, not volunteering to answer questions in class, avoiding eye contact, not asking questions to the teacher about assignments, not participating in small talk with the teacher, not being engaged with the material, memorizing material by rote, and not paying attention to teacher
explanations or lecturing. This lack of participation occurred whether or not the student was the target of harsh language, which suggests that the classroom atmosphere category can lead to the lower participation even without individual negative feelings.

Therefore, even at this initial stage a simplified model of harsh language can be created showing possible relationships between categories (chart 1). Future stages of the research project will help refine this model through theoretical sampling and questioning to determine a fuller picture of the properties and dimensions of each category. (Theoretical sampling means “going back into the empirical world and collecting more data about the properties of your category” (Charmaz, 2006, 57). It means seeking data to more fully develop your categories and understanding of the theory). I will also seek out confirming/disconfirming cases to test my early categories and analysis. Besides increasing the density, or fleshing out, these categories, later stages of the research project will seek to better understand the intervening contexts that influence perceptions of harsh communication in the classroom. For example, from the data gathered so far, the impact of class-room dynamics and peer influences seem like essential variables. However, I do not yet have clarity of how to define these categories and interpret their specific roles in the model of harsh communication used by teachers. A second example related to the context of the model is that some students have already noted the complexity of having teachers who use a mix of both harsh and encouraging language in their classrooms. Other participants have noted that the impacts of the harsh language seem less harsh with teachers they already have a good relationship with. Still others note being fearful upon entering a classroom with a teacher who has the reputation of using harsh language, even before that teacher has lived up to that reputation. These all suggest that teacher relationships and reputations might serve as a context to complicate the initial model of teachers’ use of harsh language. The iterative nature of grounded theory encourages questioning of this sort early in the process to guide later stages of data collection and analysis, thus ensuring a more complex and developed theory.
Relating grounded theories to previously developed theories

Unlike other quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, grounded theorists are urged not to conduct in-depth literature reviews at the outset of a project. If a researcher already has extensive knowledge of a potentially related theory, they are urged to consistently consider how their previous knowledge may be unfairly imposed upon the research participants' experiences. The goal of grounded theory is not to force previous concepts or categories onto the data collected, but instead to let concepts and theories emerge from the data itself (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, towards the end of a research project, the researcher should compare the theory developed using grounded theory methods to any relevant previous research. This process can highlight differences from previous theories and suggest new directions for research. Most importantly, for the purpose of this paper, potential cultural distinctions might be found in grounded theory studies conducted in new cultural contexts compared to theories previously developed in outside cultures.

Although it is too early in the research process for me to make in-depth comparisons to the available literature on aggressive communication in the classroom, I will note a few
initial differences. So far, the largest distinction to previous research revolves around the issue of individualistic focus. All previous research conducted in the United States and elsewhere have defined verbal aggressiveness as perceived attacks upon an individual's self-concept (Infante, 1988; Myers et al., 2007). While in this grounded theory some of the harsh language has the effect of hurting individuals self-concept by causing humiliation, self-doubt, or a lack of confidence, that is not the only way harsh language is conceptualized. Indeed, one of the central categories of this grounded theory of harsh teacher language is a fearful and unsafe classroom environment. This atmosphere is created regardless of who is targeted by the harsh language, and even if the harsh language is not targeted at any one individual (such as with yelling or shouting). In addition, several interview participants noted that the language felt most harsh and had the greatest negative impact when the communication occurred in front of other students. This added peer component, while not directly contradictory to the U.S. developed theories, has been ignored by previous research on the topic. In addition, the issue of compliance and obedience has been left out of previous theories of aggressive language use by teachers. Whether these differences are culturally-based cannot be said for sure, but a different model of harsh language certainly seems to be operating in the Indonesian context.

**Conclusion**

Therefore, by examining the development of a grounded theory of perceived teacher harsh/aggressive language in the Indonesian context, we can see the benefits of using this research methodology for generating new insights. Instead of relying on theories developed in foreign contexts and testing their validity within Indonesia (or parts of Indonesia), we can develop theories that are more appropriate and sensitive to local influences. Grounded theory is a qualitative process that requires early coding and analysis to develop concepts and categories grounded in actual data. Although it may appear time-consuming, it is also a research methodology that allows for easy self-correction and development. If early interviews (or other forms of data-collection) do not yield useful data, that will be apparent as the researcher attempts to develop categories with clear properties and dimensions. The end result of a grounded theory should be a fully developed model explaining a process or activity. In the final stages of the project the researcher will be expected to state theoretical propositions showing how different categories influence or impact the central process being researched. For example, in this study on harsh language, a possible theoretical proposition
might state how the classroom atmosphere leads to lower classroom participation. That final model with propositions can then be the end of the research project, or the researcher can develop a quantitative instrument to actually measure and test the propositions/theory. Through the use of grounded theory methods, and later quantitative testing, we can encourage theory development and refinement that actually reflects local experiences more accurately and sensitively than theories imported and applied to Indonesia.
REFERENCES