

A “Goffmanian” Blending Analysis of the Pronoun *We* in ESL Classroom Instruction

Hiroshi Takahashi
English Language Program
International Christian University

Discourse studies within the cognitive-linguistic framework of Mental Space Theory and Blending Theory (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) have been less successful in incorporating situational contexts in their analysis of interactional data. One promising avenue for narrowing this gap is to integrate the MST-BT program with the insights of Erving Goffman, especially his interactionally grounded notion of “frame”. This paper is an attempt to achieve this integration through a conceptual blending analysis of the first person pronoun *we* in teacher-student interactions in the English as a Second Language (ESL) context.

If the sociologist Erving Goffman were alive today and called upon to refine the existing enterprise of Cognitive Linguistics, especially in its analysis of naturally occurring discourse in face-to-face interactions, how would he respond? There is obviously no definitive answer to this question, but there is a promising entry point through which we can start to examine how Goffman’s insights might productively interact with discourse studies in Cognitive Linguistics, viz. Mental Space Theory (MST) and Conceptual Blending Theory (BT), a powerful theoretical paradigm proposed by Fauconnier (1994, 1997) and Fauconnier and Turner (2000, 2001, 2002, *inter alia*) to account for cognitive processes presumably involved in online construction of meaning in ongoing discourse. In fact, the MST and BT framework makes explicit reference to Goffman’s work in its theoretical formulation of how mental spaces are structured by frames and other similar cognitive models. In this paper, I intend to explore how research in MST and BT can be enriched in a revealing way through their integration with some salient Goffmanian perspectives, in particular his notion of “frame” (Goffman, 1974; 1981).

The venue I have chosen for this rather ambitious attempt is the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, a choice made mainly because discourse studies in Cognitive Linguistics have hitherto skirted discourse patterns in ESL and any other second language (L2) classroom interactions. The main objective of the paper is thus twofold: to investigate how Goffman’s notion of “frame” would beneficially augment the mainstream thinking of MST and BT, and to explore how such a revised version of the MST-BT enterprise can illuminate

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aspects of classroom interactions in the ESL context that have been left relatively untouched. The analysis will focus on the use of the first person plural pronoun *we* in actual recorded interactions in an advanced ESL class at a U.S. university from the perspective of the Goffman-enriched MST-BT framework.

Theoretical Background: Mental Spaces and Conceptual Blending

Mental spaces are small conceptual packets built up provisionally as we think and talk for the purpose of local understanding and action (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002, p. 40) and they “contain partial representations of the entities and relationships in any given scenario as perceived, imagined, remembered, or otherwise understood by a speaker” (Coulson & Oakley, 2005, p. 1512). In its embryonic stage, Mental Space Theory focused mainly, if not exclusively, on the kinds of puzzling referential relationships linguistically encoded in discourse that elude any rational account from the perspective of logic. In one of the most celebrated examples, the sentence *Len believes that the girl with blue eyes has green eyes* cannot be assigned any plausible truth-conditional value if the exclusive principle in logic is to be taken seriously. MST, by contrast, offers an elegant solution to such a logical paradox by invoking two partially represented mental spaces, the Reality space to which Lenny’s sense of reality is anchored, and the Belief space opened up by the *space builder* “believe”, in which the content of his specific belief about the described girl resides. On this view, the girl in the Reality space is connected to the girl in the Belief space through a pragmatic connector of identity and the apparent contradiction about the color of the girl’s eyes is resolved as the description “green eyes” needs to hold only in the Belief space.

In its early evolution, however, it gradually became clear that MST as it was originally conceived was not sufficiently equipped to handle certain well attested linguistic phenomena, including counterfactuals and metaphors. This revelation in turn gave rise to the development of a theory of conceptual blending or conceptual integration that builds on the basic insights of MST. In its most standard form, a conceptually blended structure involves four spaces: two input spaces from which elements are selectively projected onto a blended space, while whatever commonalities that hold between the two input spaces are contained in a generic space that somehow regulates psychologically valid combinations of input spaces for blending. The easiest way to illustrate how conceptual blending works is to demonstrate how certain metaphorical expressions cannot be given a straightforward explanation for their conveyed meanings within the standard cognitive-linguistic theory of conceptual metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1993) which treats metaphors as conceptual mappings from their “source” domains to their “target” domains. A

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case in point is the oft-quoted metaphor in the literature, *This surgeon is a butcher*. According to Grady, Oakley, and Coulson (1999), one of the most immediately available interpretations of the metaphor, without any further contextual information, is that it is a damning statement about the surgeon's ineptness as a practitioner. This "emergent" meaning, the authors argue, cannot be captured adequately by the supposed correspondences between the source domain of butchery and the target domain of surgery, such as *surgeon as butcher*, *scalpel as cleaver*, and *patient as dead meat*, because the notion of incompetence does not arise from such mappings; butchers, after all, cannot be said to be "incompetent" at what they do. The solution the authors offer is that through selective projection from the two input spaces (the "surgery" and "butchery" spaces), the surgeon emerges as incompetent because the fundamental incongruity of the butcher's means (i.e. butchery) with the surgeon's ends (i.e. healing the patient) in the blended space leads to a central inference about his/her incompetence (ibid, pp. 103-106).

Another basic assumption that undergirds both MST and BT is that language "does not carry meaning, it guides it" (Fauconnier, 1994, xxii) by providing prompts, or instructions, for constructing particular configurations of mental spaces and their integration. In other words, linguistic elements are underspecified as to the actual message they convey in specific contexts and the role of context is thus vital to any full-scale understanding of how online construction of meaning is possible in discourse. The MST-BT program, however, has yet to fully embrace this theoretical and empirical imperative of incorporating specific local contextual information into its basic scheme. This is exactly where Goffman comes into play, as his frame analysis has demonstrated how interactants' co-constructed understanding of "what is going on" in specific social situations has a profound impact on the intersubjective meaning realization of concrete utterances (Goffman, 1974; 1981).

Interactional Meaning Construction and Conceptual Blending

The scope of the term *frame* often used in the MST and BT literature overlaps with what Tannen and Wallat (1987, p. 207) call "knowledge structure schema", which refers to "participants' expectations about people, objects, events, and settings in the world". Knowledge structure schemas contrast with "interactive frames" in that the latter refers to "a definition of what is going on, without which no utterance (or movement, or gesture) could be interpreted" (ibid, p. 206). This situationally grounded definition of interactive frames is apparently what Goffman intended when he used the term in his exposition of how our everyday experience is socially organized. It is thus safe to say that Goffman's original insights about how such frames affect situated meaning have

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yet to be fully integrated with any standard models of mental spaces and conceptual blending along the lines of Fauconnier and Turner (2002). Drawing on Bateson's original idea of how there is a meta-message level of communication that signals to relevant participants certain ways in which the conveyed message should be interpreted, Goffman defines *frames* informally as the answer to the question "What is it that's going on here?" and more formally as situational "principles of organization that govern events, at least social ones, and our subjective involvement in them" (Goffman, 1974, p. 10).

My central contention here is that this Goffmanian notion of frame plays a significant role in making sense of particular conceptual integration networks that comprise constellations of blended and non-blended spaces. More specifically, such dynamic frames effectively signal what is "situationally relevant" at the moment of interaction, a suggestion that I believe will make a substantive contribution to the six-space model of conceptual blending put forth by Brandt (2004, 2005) and Brandt and Brandt (2005), which is a "nonstandard" alternative to Fauconnier and Turner's framework.

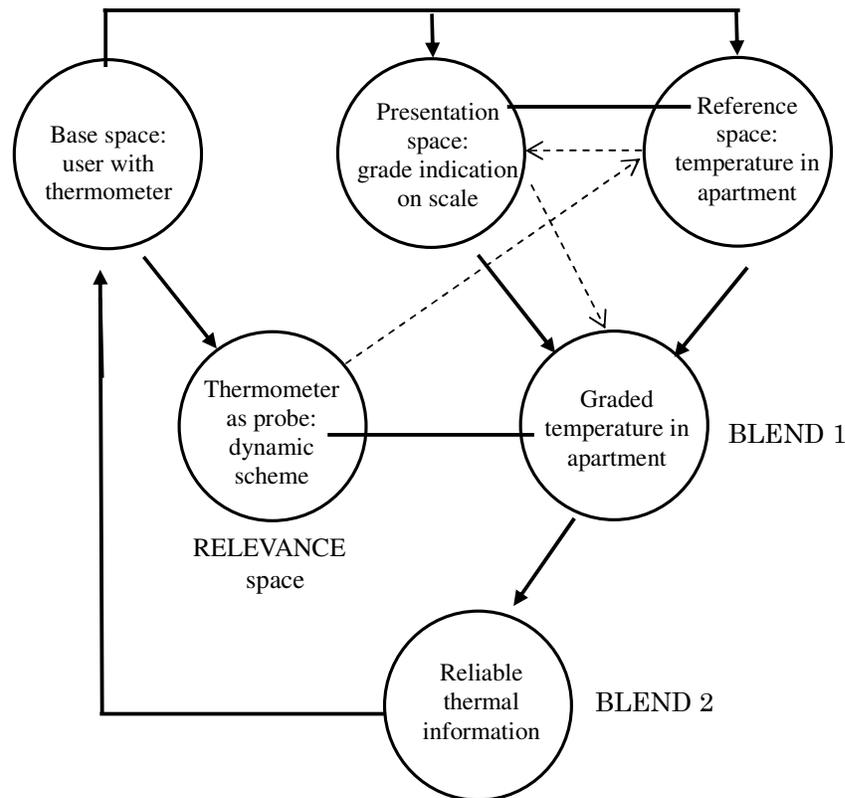
An Alternative View of Mental Spaces and Conceptual Integration

For any communicative event, Brandt and Brandt (2005) posit a semiotic **Base** space in which the very act of saying (or signification) takes place. A topical space that is set up from this base space is called a **Reference** space. When this happens, a parallel space will often accompany it, namely "a 'site' containing a way to imagine or otherwise access the reference, a way in which it is present or presented to the cognizer. This space is called a **Presentation** space of contents that our mind tires to map onto the referential content (Brandt, 2005, p. 1589). If a blend of the contents in the Presentation space and the Reference space obtains, then the Blended space (**Blend 1** or **Virtual** space) will offer to the cognizing mind an instance of the referent as possessing the properties predicated of it (*ibid*, p. 1590). Brandt (2004, 2005) and Brandt and Brandt (2005) go on to suggest a third input space stemming from the Base, namely, a **Relevance** space which contains contextual semantic prerequisites and dynamic schemas projected onto the first blend to stabilize its meaning, yielding a final blended space where the situationally relevant meaning of the blend emerges (**Blend 2** or **Meaning** space). This skeletal framework can perhaps be better grasped by applying it to a specific example. To use one of the examples given in Brandt (2005), let us imagine a situation in which you use a thermometer. Their claim is that there is some basic blending process going on in the culturally defined meaning of reading a notch on the scale of a thermometer, a process not unlike those in more complex blending phenomena, including metaphors. Since the thermometer is used to measure temperatures, the current

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temperature of wherever you are will be set up in the Reference space as a topical element. Then suppose you look upon the graded scale of the thermometer, which will then be set up in the Presentation space. This scale on the device and your apartment's thermic potential are then connected by a simple mapping to yield an imaginary blend. If the thermometer is believed to be a good, reliable probe in your culture (i.e., the use of the artifact is "relevant" to knowing the actual temperature of your room), then the blend is projected into another blended space that contains a situationally appropriate interpretation of the scale. This information, once deemed valid, is imported into the Base space. The corresponding network of mental spaces is presented in Fig. 1 below. It should be noted that this basic structure applies to other cases of conceptual blending, including metaphors.

Fig. 1: Thermometer as a material anchor for conceptual blending (Brandt, 2005, p. 1591)



In their detailed reanalysis of the *surgeon as a butcher* metaphor extensively discussed in Grady, Oakley and Coulson (1999), Brandt and Brandt argue that the surgeon is criticized for having acted in an ethically indefensible manner, rather than for being incompetent. This interpretation is inferred, they maintain, from some "situationally relevant" evaluative content presumed to reside in the Relevance space. In fact, without this interactionally relevant

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understanding of “what it is that is going on now” in the Relevance space (i.e., making an ethical evaluation), it is not clear how the metaphor can be interpreted evaluatively in this way. This indicates that such interactionally relevant information is indispensable for making sense of the blended meaning of the metaphor and for ultimately arriving at a situationally appropriate interpretation of the utterance. Notice here that what the Relevance space is hypothesized to be doing can be essentially equated with Fauconnier and Turner’s notion of selective projection, as is suggested by Hougaard (2005).

One may ask at this point: Then, what relevance do all these semiotic procedures have to the proposed significance of Goffman’s insights for the MST-BT program? The answer is quite simple and can be presented in the form of a hypothesis: What organizes Brandt’s Relevance space is what Goffman attempted to capture with his notion of frame – an interactionally relevant frame in a given communicative event which is negotiated and co-constructed among participants while maintaining interactional order (i.e. “what is going on now”). In other words, Goffman’s notion of frame crucially regulates and sanctions the overall import (to be realized in Blend 2) of any “hyperliteral” blend in Blend 1 in the six-space model of blending. The meaning of any conceptual blend, including metaphor, is thus very much susceptible to situational framing as any other acts of signification, a point often underemphasized in the standard version of MST and BT, if not actively ignored.

Blending Case Study: *We* in the ESL Context

In this section, I intend to elucidate how conceptual integration and disintegration can affect interlocutors’ understanding of the situation at hand by investigating the use of the first person plural pronoun *we* in specific interactions in an ESL classroom.

Data

All the data used in the following analysis come from a single source: interactions in an English as a Second Language class at Georgetown University, videotaped on Oct. 26, 1998. This “Advanced Communication Skills” class, consisting of seven students from diverse cultural backgrounds, was taught by a teacher who is a native speaker of English. The focus of the classroom activity was a listening comprehension exercise that used a short video clip on the development of medicine in the 20th century. In the following examples, “T” means the teacher and “S” a student. The parenthesized (m) and (f) denote “male” and “female”, respectively.

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Who Are “We”? The Teacher’s Use of We as a Blend

Any learner of English who has taken an ESL class in the United States will likely be able to attest to the frequent use of the first person plural *we* by their teachers, if they are asked to pay conscious attention to the distribution of *we* in their classroom interactions. This appears to be a natural tendency because, after all, teachers themselves are also engaged in classroom activities with their students most of the time. Furthermore, teachers’ signaling of “speaker inclusiveness” through their use of *we* in the classroom is often associated with their (conscious and unconscious) effort to help create a cooperative learning environment for more reciprocal exchanges with their students, rather than an authoritarian environment where one-way traffic of information is assumed from the teacher to students. In such cases, *we* quite simply represents the set-theoretic union of the teacher and the students in the classroom, at least in inclusive uses of the pronoun, where the speaker (the teacher) includes his/her addressee(s) in the referent(s) of *we*. No complications seem to arise.

The transcription data used in this study, however, paint a different picture. There are some uses of *we* that suggest instances of conceptual blending, rather than simple unions in which the speaker and the addressee(s) are lumped together to form a group as a reference point from which the situation is viewed.

The first example in (2) is an exchange that took place at an early point in the class, when the teacher is explaining to the students what they are going to listen to that day for their listening comprehension practice and how the content is different from the materials used before in listening comprehension exercises in the class. The numbers on the left correspond to the line numbers given in the full transcript in Appendix 1.

(2)

T: A:nd instead of uh learning new microstrategies, new organizational strategies, (°)for note taking, we’re gonna try to apply the ones we’ve already learned (+) to these, to these documentaries. Okay so we’re still doing listening, we’re still doing note-taking, but it’s a slightly different format. Okay ‘nd the reason for that is (+) two-fold. First of all, not everything **you** listen to is lectures, ‘nd second of all, **we’re, we** have this new theme of the twentieth century, which Ms. (unintelligible)’s told **you** about, right?

Ss: Yeah. Uhm.

T: The twentieth century, **your** big final evaluATION task which starts in the middle of the semester. Okay.

S(m): **We’ve** already started.

T: Yeah, **I** know ((nod)) SO, NOW starting in this class
Okay. SO uh um (+) before **we** watch the video,
it’s just a very short segment, sort of an introduction to this series of documentaries
Before **we** watch that, let **me** ask **you** (+) one question.
And that is: How has medicine changed in the last hundred years? (+++)

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At first glance, all of the occurrences of *we* in the underlined part appear to be ordinary uses of the pronoun to represent both the teacher (speaker) and the students (addressees). Upon closer scrutiny, however, it becomes clear that such an understanding is likely to be missing an important point. Suppose all instances of *we* here refer to the set-theoretic union of the teacher and the students. If that is the case, the message conveyed by the underlined part should not undergo a dramatic change even if all occurrences of *we* are replaced by *you and I*, as in (3), if we disregard the stylistic awkwardness of using *you and I* repeatedly in a short segment of discourse.

- (3) **You and I** are gonna try to apply the ones **you and I** have already learned (+) to these, to these documentaries. Okay so **you and I** are still doing listening, **you and I** are still doing note-taking, but it's a slightly different format.

What emerges from this simple experiment is an apparent discrepancy between the teacher's position as an "instructor" and the idea of the teacher (as "*I*") engaging in particular learning processes designed by some verb phrases, particularly "have learned (the ones)" and "doing note taking". In the actual classroom activities, the teacher does not take notes (at least not in the same as the students do), nor has she learned the microstrategies and other organizational strategies for note-taking that she mentioned, at least not synchronously with the students in the same classroom. If anything, she is rather in a position to impart her knowledge of such strategies to the students. I do not intend to rule out the possibility that teachers do learn new things about or gain new insights into the material they are teaching. On the contrary, it is probably the norm that they do. Even so, the type of learning that takes place in such cases is quite different from the type of learning that is usually achieved by students in classroom settings.

It is my hypothesis that this kind of conceptual discrepancy in the use of *we* in the classroom triggers a conceptual blend in online construction of meaning in face-to-face interaction. This idea is fully compatible with Harder's (2003) contention that there should be some potential contradiction between relevant pieces of information in order for partitioned mental representations (i.e. mental spaces) to obtain for conceptual blending.

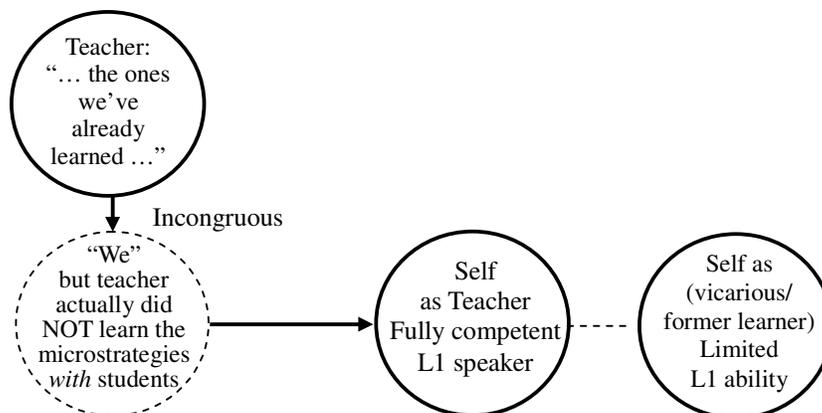
I further hypothesize that the process of conceptual blending that unfolds over (instantaneous) time in such uses of *we* also involves a simultaneous process of conceptual disintegration, in particular a "splitting" of the self (Hougaard, 2005). In sentences like *Richard's at war with himself over who to marry*, incompatible aspects of a person are conceptualized as different people (Lakoff, 1996) and the self is thus split into two mental spaces, whose respective elements are in turn projected into a blended space to engender certain emergent meanings. "Different aspects of the same 'person' are manipulated individually

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in the blend yielding emergent inferences that elaborate the conceptualization of ‘Richard’ in the Dilemma space” (Hougaard, 2005, p. 1664).

In the above ESL example in (2), then, what aspects of the speaker’s self can be conceived as incompatible? My answer resides in the basic asymmetry that holds in pedagogical relationships between those who teach and those who learn in instructional settings. In (2), the teacher is linguistically including herself in the group of people who have “learned” certain strategies, but learning and teaching do not usually take place within an individual simultaneously, although the notion of “self-teaching” is real to the extent that one’s knowledge status at one point may inform one’s overall knowledge at some different time. This notion of asymmetry is apparently weaker than the kinds of “contradiction” seen in *Richard’s at war with himself over who to marry*, but the teacher’s self is better understood as having two different aspects residing in different mental spaces (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Splitting process for the teacher’s self in (2)



In addition to being a teacher, the instructor is also depicting herself as playing the role of learner in some sense (e.g., as a “vicarious” learner or as a “former” learner). Since the notion of asymmetry is weaker than the notion of contradiction, I presume that this process of splitting of the self does not receive high cognitive prominence and thus is likely to unfold in the background of the speaker’s consciousness.

With this argument about splitting in the background, let us see how the proposed process of conceptual blending for *we* in (2) may unfold. The model employed for the proposed blend is the six-space model posited by Brandt (2004, 2005) and Brandt and Brandt (2005), which was outlined in Section 3.

The use of *we* in *the ones we’ve already learned* first sets up two mental spaces, one housing the teacher and the other housing the students. If we are to assume that this instance of *we* still reflects the teacher’s viewpoint, the “I” space will be the Reference space with a topical element (i.e., the teacher)

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because in this case, it is the teacher that is characterized in some way by elements in the “You” space, which will thus be the Presentation space. These two input spaces are structured by the teacher schema and the student schema, respectively, which are both stable knowledge structures stored in long-term memory, in the sense of Tannen and Wallat (1987). Then elements in the two input spaces are projected into the first blended space to yield some “hyperliterate” amalgam of concepts, namely, a group of individuals serving as both teacher and student, with their L2 ability conceptualized as if it were their L1 ability in some sense. At this stage, it is not clear how this blend can be interpreted in a situationally relevant way, until it is “significated” through the Relevant space, which I argue contains what Goffman (1974) called the “primary framework” of the situation at hand, i.e. the “dynamic interactional frame” in the sense of Tannen and Wallat (1987). My contention here is that the frame that is co-constructed by the interlocutors to be interactionally relevant to the situation is some kind of “collaborative learning”, where coordinated attempts are made to achieve learning in a secure environment, rather than some unidirectional flow of information in an authoritarian setting. This frame of collaborative learning then sanctions the emergent meaning of *we* as a group of collaborative learners in the second blended space, and that revised understanding of the situation is imported back to update the base space for further construction of mental space networks. Notice that this blended group of collaborative learners can be presumed to have their L2 (English) abilities scaffolded by the instructor’s fully competent ability as a native speaker of English because in this kind of collaborative environment, learners can be “pushed” to a higher level of proficiency without feeling threatened, a situation somewhat akin to Vygotsky’s notion of the zone of proximal development. A diagrammatic representation of the blending process is presented in Fig. 3 below.

Another likely instance of this blending process is seen in the following sequence in (4) as well.

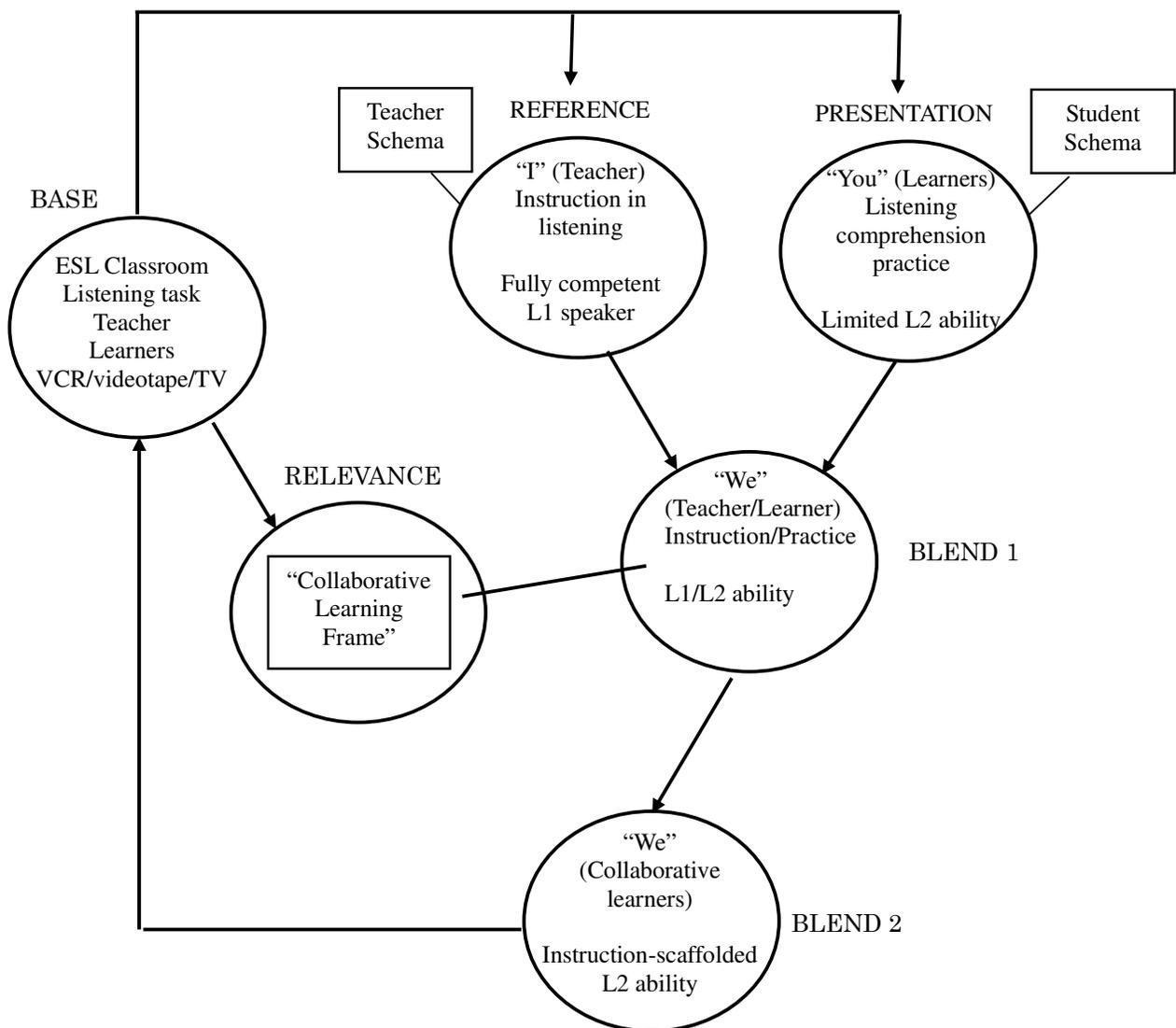
(4)

- T: “In vain”? (+) I don’t think **we**’ve studied this expression in *All Clear* yet.
If you search “in vain”, or you hunt “in vain”, you look for something “in vain”, it means (+)
- S(m): You go to the roots of it
- T: (++) No, the Opposite.
- S(m): opposite?
- T: You don’t get .. you search and you search but it’s all “in vain” because you didn’t find it (+) right? So if something’s in vain, that means “useless”.
- Ss: un-hun
- T: right? All this work done for nothing.

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Here, the process designated by the verb *study* is something that the students engaged in at some point up to the present, but the teacher herself did not “study” the meaning of the phrase “in vain” in the same sense as the students; she acquired the meaning of the phrase through natural interactions with speakers of English, while that kind of “naturalistic” learning does not happen for the students to the same extent as the teacher’s own experience. This incongruity is thus a good candidate for triggering the kind of conceptual blending described above to reinforce the frame of collaborative learning in the updated base space, which is indeed the interactionally relevant frame negotiated and co-constructed by the participants to be interactionally relevant for the situation at hand.

Fig. 3: Mental space representation of the online processes of blending



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A gradience of We-ness

It should be noted here that I am not arguing that any instance of *we* has the potential of triggering a conceptual blend. My contention is rather that there seems to be a “gradience of We-ness” along which specific instances of the first person plural pronoun can be arrayed, depending on the intensity of incongruity perceived between the standard You-and-Me schema (which conceives the referents of *we* as a simple sum of individuals) and whatever process designated in discourse to involve both “you” and “me”. When there is little to no incongruity, the interpretation of *we* has a low degree of We-ness, as defined by the extent to which all intended referents of *we* participate in the depicted process as a coherent group of equals for some intentional purpose, rather than as a simple set-theoretic union of individuals based primarily on their temporal and/or geographical copresence. For instance, in the exchange in (5), the use of *we* in the underlined part appears to clash, at least to some extent, with the following imperative, *pay attention to the use of the “ether”*, because such an imperative usually has the addressee(s) as the understood subject of the designated process.

(5)

T: Why were they using ether? (+) “ETHER.” Did anybody else hear it?

Oh well, they were using ether, so they had to turn off the gaslight.

S(m): Ether (unintelligible)... react as a combustion, I don't know ...

T: Right. Ether is flammable. But why were they using ether in an operation?

S(m): Oh, for the lights, um for like (unintelligible) the candles?

T: No, the lights were gas ...

S(m): I know, so for the, for the thing he was ...
(unintelligible)

S(f): the gaslight

T: Let's listen to it again. When we listen to it again, pay attention to the use of the “ether.”

Okay, what other details did you hear?

In cases like this, I hypothesize that the use of *we* is placed on an intermediate point along the cline of We-ness between the conception of *we* as a sum of individuals and the conception of *we* as a coherent group of equals with a strong motivation to achieve a certain goal. Therefore, there is no definitive answer to the question of whether the kind of conceptual blending proposed for the sequences in (2) and (4) would obtain. If the interactional frame established at the time of the exchange has a structure that prompts such blending, a blend may

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indeed be carried out. On the other hand, in sequences like that in (6), the use of *we* in the underlined part is fully compatible with the You-and-Me schema and thus a blending process is unlikely to be initiated at all.

(6)

T: Umm, today in the first hour of class **we** are going to do this listening activity which I'll tell you about in a moment, and then in the second (+) hour of class **we** are going to um (+) talk about *All Clear* and do the dialogue if **we** can do that, and if not, at least going to the computer lab and look up some things about the IMF (+) because remember I told you that Wednesday **we** are going to the IMF (+) right? **We**'ll talk about that more in the second hour just so you know what we are doing for today.

So (++) what I have here today is a documentary, *A Science Odyssey – Matters of Life and Death*. This is something completely different from what **we** have been doing before – not completely different but a little bit different, right? So think about everything that **we**'ve done in learning to listen, listening to learn, looking at the microstrategies, listening to those lectures, taking notes on those lectures.

Thus, under my hypothesis, the kind of “We-ness” achieved through conceptual blending by using *we* to yield the conception of a motivated group of equals working toward a common goal is not categorical but is rather graded and continuous. If any of this is true, ESL teachers seem to have a lot to gain from using “blended *we*” to encourage students to participate in the learning as collaborative co-learners. In that sense, blended *we* can be an effective “positive face” strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987) in the ESL classroom (or presumably any other classrooms).

Conclusion

Using an updated model of blending, this paper has examined how the use of *we* in certain instances can be reanalyzed as prompting a conceptual blend in which the referents of *we* are conceived of as a highly motivated group of equals working toward a shared goal. The underlying hypothesis there was that there is a cline of “We-ness” along which specific occurrences of *we* can be placed, ranging from the most individualistic reading of *we* to the most collaborative interpretation, which can be achieved by “situated” conceptual blending. Since the size of the data was rather small and there were only a handful of instances of *we* that were analyzed in naturally occurring discourse, however, the findings of this paper need to be validated through more extensive,

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empirically sound studies, including those employing large-scale corpora of interactional data.

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