英文口語中之性別差異 -- 以英文為外語 (EFL)學習者之個案研究

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I. Introduction

Although gendered differentiation in language use and interactional styles are well documented, previous studies are largely based on the data from L1. Beebe (1988) points out that second language teachers should be cautious when trying to apply findings in sociolinguistics into their classroom. As she indicates:

> For all its contributions to SLA, however, there are limitations in the usefulness of first language sociolinguistics as currently practiced. For one thing, second language performance is qualitatively different from first language performance in at least one important respect: SLA is developmentally incomplete. Second language (L2) performance involves using a repertoire that is both limited and in a state of flux. Native speakers have a complete command of their mother tongue; any changes in their system are minor in comparison to the change made by active learners of a second language. So there would be a problem if we were to accept without question the principles of L1 variable language performance (1988: 44).

As previous studies on gender and language are largely based on the data from speakers' native language and are limited to Western society and culture (particularly middle-class white men and women (Holmes, 2006), this study intends to explore college students oral discourse with respect to language and gender in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context in Taiwan.

This paper, by analyzing EFL learners' spoken discourse with respect to three linguistic devices – the most salient features in distinguishing male and female

languages – telling stories, hedges, and collaborative completion, aims to provide a preliminary account of variation in linguistic strategies used by the all-male or all-female groups. The first aim of this study is to contribute to the study on language and gender with a focus in EFL learners' oral discourse. This study also aims to provide pedagogical suggestions for EFL language teachers or material writers, who want to design activities or prepare teaching materials to help students generate output as close as possible to natural conversation.

This study begins with a discussion of approaches to language and gender. A theoretical approach which views gender identity as categorical and static is discussed and compared with a more recent approach, community of practice. Previous studies on language and gender are then reviewed in differing linguistic and interactional styles. The EFL learners' oral discourse is then analyzed and discussed with respect to the three linguistic devices – narratives, hedges, and collaborative completions. Conclusions and pedagogical implications for EFL teaching are then drawn.

II. Literature Review

Gender Identity: A view of a polarity

The pioneering work on language and gender begins from the feminist movement in the 1970s. Lakoff's work (1975) has initiated the thriving research on sociolinguistic studies on gender. Her study reflects the notions of social roles that were prevalent during the 70s -- that gender identities are fixed and permanently residing within an individual.

However, the claims about gendered differences in language behaviors in the studies from the 70s to 80s tend to be over-generalized as most of the studies are based on limited populations (white, middle-class men or women in the United States)(Ehrlich, 1997; Hall & Buchotz, 1995). Johnstone (1993) and Holmes (2006) caution that any general claims about what women and men differ in their verbal behaviors based on studies about a subset of women and men must be examined critically. Bing and Bergvall (1996, in Ehrlich 1997)) argue that a focus on difference only emphasizes the stereotype of a polarity between men and women and

that such a polarity may not serve women's interests:

> The problem with gender polarization is not that there are differences, but that these differences define mutually exclusive scripts for being female and male. Gender polarization makes it easier to limit opportunities and exclude girls and women from education, public office, and the military and easier to deny them legal protection and highly paid positions.
>
> (p.16, cited in Ehrlich, 1997:423)

Under such a view of polarity, the difference between male and female language is seemingly maximally contrastive. However, such a notion that gender identity is static and fixed has been rejected by some researches. Freeman and McElhinny (1996) points out that one crucial flaw in Lakoff's (1975) description of language and gender is that, by focusing on linguistic forms only, the study failed to examine the ways gender is constructed and negotiated in interaction. In a similar vein, Tannen (1993) argues that interpreting or understanding the meaning of a linguistic form usually requires careful attention to the possible meanings a linguistic form may have as well as its interactional context of use and the relationship among interlocutors. That is, besides linguistic forms, studies on language and gender should also take into account several factors such as context and interactional styles.

Gender Identity: Gender as social practice

Recent studies in gender have shifted to a 'social construction' paradigm. Gender identity and other aspects of social identities are regarded as locally and interactionally constituted and negotiated. Under such a notion, gender identity varies across situational, social, and interactional contexts (Coates, 1996, 2003; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Ehrlich, 1997; Freeman & McElhinny, 1996; Holmes, 2006; Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999). Gender identities are maintained through social practices, including language use. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) denominate this notion "community of practice." The community of practice is defined as "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations –in short, practice – emerge in the course of their joint activity around that endeavor"

(Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992: 95). According to this concept, gender is constructed and reconstructed in differing membership in such a community of practice (Wodak, 1997; Holmes, 2006; Holmes &Meyerhoff, 1999).

The notion of "gender as social practice" (or "community of practice") has influenced the way researchers on language and gender provide explanations for language variation and style shift. For instance, Goodwin (1990) reveals that the conversational strategies adopted by boys and girls not only are gender-specific, but also vary with conversational activities and participation framework. According to Goodwin, both genders are capable of using various strategies -- cooperative or uncooperative – in the conversation to achieve their aims in social interaction. It's not necessarily the case that girls, according to previous studies in the 80's, tend to use more cooperative strategies in conversations.

McElhinny (1995), in a study of the interactional styles of female and male police officers in Pittsburgh, argues that female police officers adopt a "bureaucratic" interactional style – a style which is often associated with "middle-class masculinity." In other words, both the male police officers and the female police officers produce similar interactional styles since they are involved in the same activities – the same workplace practices. The study reveals that social practices can mediate between gender and language.

In brief, recent work on gender and language has focused more on the significance of context in the analysis of gender differentiation. Gender is no longer static but is produced in interaction with others: "Speakers are seen as 'performing' masculinity or femininity." (Thornborrow & Coates, 2005:9) As the categorical notion of gender identity and the polarized view about gender roles have been rejected, recent work on language and gender provides explanations for difference of male and female linguistic preferences, based on the view that gender is locally and interactionally constituted and negotiated.

Gender & Linguistic Preferences

Narrative (Telling Stories)

Narrative is perhaps a primary and central function of language. Through

telling stories, we describe ourselves to others. It is now widely claimed that narrative plays a key role in the construction of the self (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; De Fina, 2003). Accordingly, narrative plays a significant role in the construction of gender. Coates (1996, 1997b) notes that narrative, or story-telling, plays an important role in friendly conversation. Narrative is particularly significant between women friends since telling stories can fulfill female friends' need to "keep in touch with each other's lives." (1996:248)

Johnstone (1993) investigates the correlation between gender and narrative and finds that men's stories and women's stories differ in terms of thematic choices and discourse choices. With respect to the thematic choices, men's narratives tend to be about competition, while women's narratives are about community. In terms of discourse choices, males specify place and time in their narratives more often than females, while females specify personal names more than twice as often as men do. Coupland, Garrett & Williams (2005) investigate the gendered nature of narrative: both males and females tell stories, but they differ in terms of the topics of their stories. They find that boys tell stories about personal adventures, mishaps or risks, and conflict with authority figures. The findings of Coupland et al. also support Coates (2003): these topics of narratives are the staple of male narrative. Brockmeier & Carbaugh (2001:16) claim that we construct our culture and the self through narratves.

Hedging

Hedges may serve various functions. One of the most recognizable uses with hedges is to mitigate a speaker's discourse or speech act. Stubbs (1988, 1996) and Skelton (1988) regarded hedges as politeness strategies. They are "understatements used to convey vagueness and tentativeness" (Salager-Meyer, 1994: 150). Coates (1997b) lists the functions of hedges and illustrates how females adopt hedges as politeness strategies:

> They can express shades of doubt and confidence; they allow us to be sensitive to others' feelings; they help us in the search for the right words to express what we mean; they help us to avoid playing the expert. The first

> of these functions -- to express doubt and confidence – is basic, but less significant in terms of women's friendships. The other three functions all have an important role in the maintenance of friendship. (p.249)

Hedges are one of the distinctive features of female language. Ever since Lakoff (1975), these linguistic forms -- indirect, unclear, vague, and weak – are always related to characteristics of stereotypical femininity. Female speech is found to be filled such hedges, which are used primarily to express doubt or uncertainty or to show sensitivity to others (Coates, 1996, 1997b; Freeman & McElhinny, 1996). Previous studies on L1 find that hedges are used more frequently by women than men (Coates, 1988, 1996, 1997a, 1997b). However, Holmes (1986) finds men and women use the hedge "*you know*" at approximately the same rates to express appeals for confirmation and mutual knowledge between interlocutors. Similarly, Coates (2003) finds that one of the male subjects used a very high frequency of hedging devices (7 hedges out of 5 lines) in his narrative – in which the male subject constructs his identity in an all-male setting. Although individual differences may account for the frequent uses of hedges in Holmes (1986) and Coates' (2003) studies, it seems that more recent L1 studies on hedges have revealed opposing findings, that hedges are only typical of women's language, to those of previous studies.

While previous studies on hedges and gender based on L1 data reveal contrasting results, a few studies on interlanguage spoken discourse in the L2 context reveal similar results: L2 speakers use interlanguage hedges in a different way that L1 speakers do. In a recent study on hedges based on EFL speakers, with a total of 211 Chinese Mainland EFL students, Yu (2009) finds that most of the EFL subjects "habitually fall back on *I think* and a few top hedges (e.g., *maybe*), regardless of their proficiencies" and gender. (p. ii) Yu (2009) concludes that this is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the EFL hedges. Investigating L2 college students in Taiwan, Lee (2010) also reports similar findings. Lee (2010) finds that L2 students use hedges as a pause filler when they are searching for words, or a device to hold the floor. Yet very few instances of hedges in the study are adopted by L2 students as a politeness strategy to show sensitivity to others' feelings or to mitigate

their speech act. In short, Yu (2009) and Lee (2010) do not find gender-related differences with respect to the use of hedges by L2 speakers.

Collaborative Constructions

Collaborative completions of utterances may take different forms. They may mean the speaker and the listener jointly construct utterances or they may mean a listener's supportive questions or supplying vocabulary when the speaker is searching for words. Collaborative constructions are common in daily conversations between native speakers as well as in informal NS-NNS and NNS-NNS interactions (Lerner, 1991 & Hall, 1994, cited in Lazaraton1996). By co-constructing utterances or supplying proper vocabulary, the interlocutors demonstrate their interest in the topic or their attention to the speech. Collaborative completions are, therefore, thought to indicate involvement, alignment, and understanding between participants (Coates, 1996, 1997b; Lazaraton 1996). Accordingly, the shared production of utterances suggests the solidarity and closeness among group members.

Collaborative constructions seem to be associated with gendered talk. However, in a more recent study, Coates (2005) reports that male speakers are more likely to construct talk collaboratively in mixed company, rather than in all-male company. She notes that, "there are no examples in the mixed conversations of collaboratively constructed narratives involving two male speakers." In other words, male speakers only collaboratively construct utterances with female speakers – Coates argues that the closeness indicated by collaborative construction may threaten the hegemonic masculinity in an all-male group, while the closeness of co-construction may function as "a display of heterosexuality" (p.105).

Though there have been abundant discussions on language and gender, few of them conducted in an L2 or interlanguage context. As Beebe (1988) suggests, EFL teachers need to be cautious when we try to apply the findings based on L1 studies – not to mention the discrepancies among various findings from such studies. Therefore, to take a step of understanding how the findings of previous studies can be applied in an L2 context, this current study is conducted to explore Taiwan college students' English oral discourse in an L2 context, focusing in particular on gender

differences.

III. Method

This study investigates the following research questions: (1) Are there any gender-related variation in EFL college students' spoken discourse with respect to the three strategies -- telling stories, hedging, and collaborative construction of utterances? (2) How do male and female EFL college students employ the three strategies? Do EFL learners employ these strategies in a similar way that L1 speakers do? A discourse analysis approach is adopted to analyze the transcribed data.

Subjects

The subjects are 33 freshman students, consisting of 9 groups, at the age of 19-20, enrolled in a freshman English class at a university in northern part of Taiwan. Coming from 5 departments in the College of Commerce, eleven of the subjects are male and twenty-two females. They are asked to discuss topics related to their everyday life (see Appendix I for the topics of discussion) in groups. The subjects are chosen because freshman students, after at least six-year's studying in English, are assumed to have a fair command of oral proficiency and a functional, though limited, repertoire of conversational skills. They could fairly express themselves and are able to communicate with each other in English.

With a casual setting and familiar topics and interlocutors, the speech sample collected is believed to be able to represent student's proficiency in a semi-natural situation. The relationship among participants was intimate and friendly since students chose their group members on their own. The solidarity among group members was expected to be fairly high, as they had to finish the discussion task collaboratively to get a score. With a view to the same age and the same educational background, they could be considered a rather homogenous speech community.

Data collection

The subjects are asked to record the process of their discussion without interruption. The data is collected from nine audiotapes recording students' spoken

discourse in the group discussion. The total length of all the tapes is approximately 140 minutes. In order to motivate students, they are told that their performance in the group discussion would be graded as part of their total semester score. The topics of discussion are the same for everyone (see Appendix I for discussion topics). After their discussion, the data is then transcribed and analyzed by a discourse analysis approach.

IV. Results & Discussion

This study analyzes how the linguistic strategies -- namely, narrative (or telling stories), hedging, shared construction of utterances are employed by male and female subjects in the spoken discourse from the group discussion.

Narrative --Telling Stories

Out of the 140-minute oral discussion collected in this study, there are only two instances of interlocutor's narratives. It may be due to the fact that subjects are rather nervous in completing the task or that subjects are limited by the topics of discussion. Therefore, only 2 narratives are identified. The following transcripts illustrate these two narratives.

In example (1), Evon, a female speaker from an all-female group, tells a narrative. When talking about how to practice English with foreigners, Evon complains that some foreigners are very shy and thereby begins to describe her own experience of meeting a foreign friend.

(1) Evon: But I meet a boy, and he tell me he is a 成吉思汗. <laughing>

Carol: Make a joke with you! <laughing>

Jane: Ya…Ya.. <laughing>

Betty: You will say you are?

Evon: I say… Do you know who is 成吉思汗, and he know a little but very many things to 成吉思汗. But he is very funny. <laughing>

(Tape 4, line 206-211)

With respect to the discourse choice, Evon specifies in her narration how the

protagonist calls himself (“成吉思汗”) and uses an adjective (“funny”) to describe him. Apparently everybody in the group enjoys Evon’s story very much. They laugh all the way through the whole narration of this particular story. Not only does Evon’s story serve to sustain the conversation, but the story also serves to share the speaker’s pleasant experience with the interlocutors.

In the following instance, James, a male subject from a mixed-sex group, narrates another story about his personal experience of practicing English with a foreign friend.

(2) James: Her name is (.) Jenny (.) she is very skin and this girl --
-- > Miranda: Thin (.) skinny
-- > James: And his..his skin is very white. <laughing>
Nicole: So (.) is she American?
James: That’s another question. He is the foreign friend in Chengda. When I went to the park, (.) a lot of foreigner, so I maybe talk to them, and show a lot of (.) show a lot (.) just talking (.2) and something you don’t understand, you can use your body language and blah, blah, blah -- <laughing>
Nicole: And guess? <laughing>
-- > James: And he is very funny. <laughing>
Miranda: Then you draw a picture and talk? <laughing>

James tells an interesting story in Example (2) about how he used body language to communicate with a foreign friend although his English proficiency is not good enough. In his narrative, James also specifies the name of the protagonist (Jenny) and uses several adjectives to describe her (“skinny” and “funny”).

This story, like the story in Example (1), also evokes laughter from his group members. It is worth noting that in his narration James keeps making mistakes. First, probably a slip of the tongue, he uses “skin” when he actually means “thin” or “skinny,” as corrected by Miranda. Then, he keeps misusing the personal pronoun “he” and the possessive “his” when he should have used “she” and “her.” However,

these minor mistakes do not impede the speaker from conveying what he wants to share with his interlocutors. Nicole and Miranda, by adding to James' description more possible ways of communicating besides using body language ("And guess?" and "Then you draw a picture and talk?"), indicate their interest as well as involvement in the story.

The two narratives are told by one female speaker in an all-female group and a male speaker in a mixed group, respectively. Both of the two stories are very short. It is likely that the subjects may be confined to their limited oral proficiency or that the setting may not need a long narration. Yet it is worth noting that the two narrators use the same adjective "funny" to describe the protagonists in their story. It supports the findings from L1 that narratives are told to entertain or to establish social norms. Through the narratives, Evon and James build a close relationship with their group member but also construct their self-identity in their stories.

However, no inference can be drawn about gender difference with this respect. More data should be collected to provide an account of how EFL male and female students employ the strategy "narrative / telling stories" to indicate their gender identity.

Hedging

This study adopts the taxonomy of hedges proposed by Salager-Meyer (1994). Totally 667 hedges[1] are identified in the corpus. Female speakers (n = 22) adopt 467 hedges out of 1776 utterances (26.3%) while male speakers (n = 11) use 200 hedges out of 661 utterances (30.3%). In terms of the percentage of frequency of occurrence, the percentage of hedges used by male subjects is slightly higher than that of female subjects. However, the difference is not statistically significant.

Of all the hedges employed by the subjects, "*I think*" and the modal "*can*" are the most frequently used ones. There are 226 instances of the hedging expressions "*I think*" out of 667 hedges identified in this study. Its frequency of occurrence is 33.9%. Hedging devices with the modal "can" – with 204 instances (30.6%) -- together with the hedge "*I think*," constitute a substantial part of the hedges identified

[1] For a detailed list of types of hedges, see Lee (2010).

in this study. Therefore, the following discussion will mainly focus on how two types of hedges -- "*can*" and "*I think*"— are used by males and females in the data.

Table 1: *can* and *I think* in EFL Learner' Oral Discourse

Types of hedges	Frequency of Occurrence	
Modals		
Can	204	30.6%
Expressions of personal involvement		
I think	226	33.9%
Total	**430**	**64.5%**

"I think" in all-male groups

The following two examples illustrate the use of "*I think*":

(3) Allen: First **I think** I can listen to the program in the Studio Classroom. [...]

And second…second **I think** I can read the newspaper in English, [...]

So **I think** …hm.. read the newspaper in English [...] is good for me…

Finally, **I think** if I'm so lazy to [...]

(Tape 3)

(4) Dick: **I think** …the best way of learning and using English outside of class is to make friends with foreigners.

I think it is very good for us to make lots of friends in many different races. [...]

And… **I think** it will make our English much better.

(Tape 3)

Allen in example (3) seems to use the hedge "I think" as a sentence-initial marker. He tends to begin his sentences with the hedging expression "*I think*." Similarly, in example (4), Dick also uses such an expression to begin his opinion. Moreover, while seeming not to know how to continue his statement, Dick also uses "*I think*" to fill the pause while he is searching for words.

Examples (3) and (4) are collected from two all-male groups respectively, in

which students tend to speak in a monologue form. The singly developed floor characterizes these all-male groups. Students tend to use "*I think*" to fill the pause or to hold the floor since there is no collaborative construction offered by other participants to sustain the discussion.

"I think" in all-female groups

The following examples demonstrate how speakers from all-female groups use the hedge "I think."

(5) Linda: And…and **I think** the college school class time is also very free. […]
(.) **I think** because I am a student so I don't…so[…]
(Tape 1)

(6) Angel: So **I think**…hm…most ..I don't think I have enough freedom.
And about food, **I think**…hm…I have least freedom. […]
But **I think** I never go abroad, so I always…I can just …[…]
(Tape 5)

Linda and Angel, who come from two all-female groups, exhibit the similar strategy adopted in the all-male groups as illustrated in examples (3) and (4). The hedge "*I think*" is used as a sentence- or clause-initial marker and is usually preceded or followed by pauses. There seems no gender difference in terms of how male and female subjects use "*I think*."

By examining more instances of speakers' oral discourse, an inference can be made concerning the usage of the expressions of personal involvement *"I think*" and "*I feel.*" That is, there is a tendency that these expressions are used in the beginning of a speaker's discussion as well as the conclusion part. This usage is particularly noticeable in the groups whose members are inclined to speak in a monologue-like form.

Consider the usage of "*I think*" in example (7):

(7) Gigi: **I think** hm…this article is very true and interesting.
[…]
Una: In fact, **I think** I have freedom in all areas in my daily life.

[…]

Lisa: Hm…**I think** the life style maybe is the answer.

[…]

(Tape 1)

Example (7) illustrates an interesting finding that each speaker in this all-female group begins their statement with the hedge “*I think*.” This may imply that speakers in the monologue groups – that is, groups with little interaction -- tend to use the hedge “*I think*” to signal the boundary of their floor.

More instances suggest that this may be the case. The following examples only cite the first few sentences of the speaker in each turn:

(8) Penny: As for me, **I think** I have most freedom to choose what I want to eat.

[…]

Beth: **I also think** I have the most freedom choice about food. […]

Angel: Maybe I’m too negative. **I think** social customs restrict everybody. […]

Cherry: About question six, **I think** I have the most freedom about friends.

(Tape 5)

(9) Jason (1): **I think** in my daily life I have more choice in choosing food. […]

Jean (1) : My daily…**I feel** I have much choice is I can do many foods. […]

Jacky (1):[…] So **I think** food is the area that the least freedom for me.

I think in this area, everything for me is very freedom. OK.

Jason (2): And then **I think** I have the least freedom in choosing my life style.

[…]

Phoenix (1): And **I think** I have no freedom to choose what I really want to study.

[…]

Jean (2): The case is almost over. **I think** I practice English outside of class is to

read science English magazines, or […]

(Tape 6)

Examples (8) and (9) illustrate a distinct pattern of the occurrence of "*I think/feel*." The hedge of "*I think/feel*" – an expression of personal involvement -- is employed by male as well as female subjects to signal who has got the floor. This usage is particularly conspicuous in the monologue groups in which speakers only talk in single floors. The hedge "*I think*" is, therefore, adopted to indicate the boundary of a speaker's floor.

The high frequency of this expression "*I think*" (33.9%) may be attributed to the fact that quite a large number of students use this expression as a sentence introductory phrase. They would begin most of their sentences with "I think." In fact, students employed "*I think*" so frequently that it seems that this hedging device has become a sentence-initial marker or pause-filler. To serve as a sentence-initial marker or pause-filler, it is not surprising that "*I think*" is usually followed or preceded by a period of silence or hesitation. However, further studies need to investigate the correlation between the length of silence and the occurrence of "*I think*" in order to examine whether "*I think*" is used as a pause-filler.

Generally speaking, there appears to be no difference in the way male and female EFL learners use the hedge "*I think*". In conclusion, the hedge "*I think*" seems to serve the following functions: first, the speaker may use "*I think*" to hold the floor or to fill the pause, especially when the speaker is searching for words to continue the discussion. Second, it is used to signal the boundary of a speaker's floor. Finally, students probably use the hedging device as a sentence-initial marker.

"can": a pause filler

We now turn to the discussion on the usage of the modal "can." Among all the modals, "can" is the most frequent used one, with a total number of 204 and a percentage of frequency of occurrence 30.6.

The following examples show that the modal "*can*" is employed as a filler when the speaker keeps repeating "I can."

(10) Beth: But my (.) But **I think** my English is not very good

Because **I can** (.) …But **I can** use English in my daily life.

I can (.) I can talk to others in English.

(Tape 5)

(11) Alex: When I'm outside, **I can** (.) **I can I can** ride motorcycle […]

(Tape 2)

(12) Rey: So **I can** (.) hmm (.) **I can** just try to listen to the actor in the movie […]

(Tape 2, Line 43)

While searching for the right words to continue their statement, the speakers in examples (10), (11) and (12) employ "*I can*" to fill in the silence or to hold the floor. The modal "*can*" serve a similar function to that of "*I think.*" Both of the hedges can be adopted to be a pause-filler or serve to hold the floor.

Interlanguage Hedges

In short, L2 speakers use interlanguage hedges ("*I think"* and "*can*") in a different way that L1 speakers do. In this study, hedges are not employed by EFL learners to convey vagueness, tentativeness, or as a politeness strategy -- as they are originally used by native speakers. Instead, the hedges are employed by L2 subjects to hold the conversational floor; or the hedges are used as pause-fillers when they are searching for words. The most important, there seems no gender-related difference in the way male and female EFL learners use these hedges. Regardless of gender, both male and female students in this study regularly adopt the two hedges "*I think"* and "*can*" as a pause-filler or a marker to hold the conversational floor.

The discrepancies between L1 and L2 speakers with respect to the use of hedges may be accounted for by the fact that an EFL learner's interlanguage is a new language, which is mediated between the target language (L2) and the native language (L1). Also, it is expected that foreign language learners, with a limited command of the target language, would be less sensitive to socially appropriate rules of speaking. Consequently, EFL learners, who have not fully acquired the appropriate usage of L2 linguistic devices and who are not sensitive to the subtle social meanings that these

linguistic forms – hedging expressions -- may carry with, are liable to employ their interlanguage hedges in a totally different way from a native speaker.

Collaborative Constructions

The following example is collected from an all-female group. It illustrates how female speakers use collaborative completions to keep a conversation going.

(13)

30 C: But I think almost everything in my daily life I have fully freedom and
31 choice to (.) to (.) arrange my life ya (.)But too many…maybe you can't
32 to arrange well. Because you have a lot of choice, and you will confuse
33 how to choice it's the best. Maybe you choose one and you'll think
34 another one is better than it. Ya.
35 E: But I think after a long time, and you'll have a (.5) habit, and you'll go
--> 36 the same 自助餐 =
--> 37 C: = cafeteria =
--> 38 E: = Ya, cafeteria and eat the same thing (.)
--> 39 so (1.0)
--> 38 J : And... what…how about the last freedom and choices?

(Tape 4)

While Evon has some trouble coming up with the vocabulary (cafeteria) in English and she utters a Chinese word in line 36, Carol immediately supplies the exact vocabulary "cafeteria" in line 37. The immediate supply of the vocabulary by Carol indicates that she is paying attention to what Evon is talking about. The latched utterance (indicated by an equal sign) may also suggest Carol's interest in Evon's statement. Moreover, Evon's utterance in line 38 indicates she is pleased with Carol's assistance. By uttering "ya" and repeating the word "cafeteria," Evon is acknowledging Carol's assistance in providing the word she couldn't come up with.

The example indicating interlocutor's support and involvement, to be discussed in the following, is not a case of collaborative completions in the sense of sentence level. However, in the sense of discourse level, it still may be considered one type of jointly constructed utterances, in which a listener poses a question to keep the

conversation going. It is an instance of supportive questions. In the end of line 36, Evon has some trouble completing her statement and the pause is so long (one second) that the situation seems embarrassing. Jane kindly breaks the ice by posing a question "And…what…how about the last freedom and choices?" saves Evon from an embarrassing situation in which she seems not to know how to finish the sentence. By posing a question and switching to another topic, Jane therefore made the conversation going smoothly.

Example (14) illustrates how speakers in a mixed-sex group employ collaborative completions to show support or alignment.

(14) -- > Elaine: You're so lazy = <turning to Nicole>

-- > Miranda: = Nicole, you're lazy.

Nicole: Like?

James: Like what? Get up early?

-- > Nicole: I always get up very =

-- > Miranda: = late!

The speakers are discussing what kind of "freedom" they have in their daily life. Before this part of discussion cited above, Nicole is complaining that she doesn't have much freedom. James then questions Nicole whether her parents "have any question about your life style." Elaine jumps in as Example (14) illustrates and says to Nicole "You're so lazy." Elaine seems to tease Nicole that the problem Nicole's parents may have about their daughter is that she is lazy. Elaine's teasing is immediately followed by Miranda's repetition and rephrase, "Nicole, you're lazy." Miranda's repetition can be viewed as a kind of collaborative completions, in which, Elaine and Miranda jointly construct the utterances "You're so lazy" and "Nicole, you're lazy" to achieve the same goal – to tease Nicole. Also, Miranda's immediate supportive feedback to Elaine's statement indicates her involvement in the conversation and understanding between Elaine and her.

Miranda seems to enjoy such collaborative completions. She likes to speak immediately after the utterance in which she is interested. She can't wait Nicole to

finish her declaration “I always get up very.” Miranda immediately utters “late” to co-construct the sentence “I always get up very.” Therefore, in example (14) Miranda has contributed to the two instances of jointly constructed utterances.

In conclusion, all the instances of collaborative completions are employed by female speakers in this study. In line with previous studies based on L1, the interlocutors, by jointly constructing utterances, demonstrate the closeness among group members, their interest in the topic, or their attention to the speech. Furthermore, as collaborative completions only occur in the groups with higher interactions among participants, the co-construction of utterances suggest a higher group rapport and solidarity. With respect to gender difference, in this study, collaborative constructions seem to be the discourse strategy that reveals gender difference between male and female speakers.

V. Conclusions

This study examines how college EFL students use three discourse strategies in a group discussion – telling stories, hedging, and collaborative constructions. In terms of gender difference, there seems to be no sufficient evidence to indicate gender-related variation with respect to the use of narratives and hedging. However, female subjects do use collaborative completions more frequently than males.

In terms of the functions of three strategies, the use of narratives and collaborative constructions are found to support previous studies. In the current study, narratives are used to arouse participants’ attention and interest. Not only does the story help sustain the conversation, but the speakers and hearers “fulfill their need to keep in touch with each other’s lives.” (Coates, 1996: 248) Similar to the findings from L1 studies, in this study the use of collaborative constructions are typical of women’s friendly conversation (Coates, 1997a, 1997b).

With respect to the use of hedging expressions, there seems no gender-related difference in the way that male and female EFL learners use these hedges (“*I think*” and “*can*”). However, the findings in this study, in line with Yu (2009) and Lee

(2010), indicate that EFL speakers use interlanguage hedges in a distinct way. In this study, hedges are not employed to convey vagueness, tentativeness, or as a politeness strategy -- as they are originally used by native speakers. Instead, the hedges mainly serve as a device to hold the floor or as a pause-filler when they are searching for words. As Yu (2009) point out, such uses of hedges can be characterized as "one of the most distinctive features for the EFL hedges." (p. ii)

Limitations

This study has the following limitations. In some groups, there are few interactions among participants. No instances of real interactions among group members– such as interlocutor support or involvement or collaborative completions -- can be found in the monologue group, which is characterized by singly developed floors. It is often the case that each speaker in a group speaks in turn, lack of the common overlapping, interruption, or fighting for their turn in natural conversation. Some students prefer to speak in such a monologue-like form in order to be easily identified in the group discussion (and therefore graded by the teacher). This may be attributed to the fact that students were asked to record the whole process of their discussion. In addition, they were told that their performance in the group discussion would be graded as part of their total semester score. As a result, the speech sample collected in such a monologue form may not sound like an authentic conversation in naturally occurring contexts.

Another limitation is the rather small sample of data and the unbalanced number of male and female students. A corpus based on a 140-minute audio recording is rather limited to draw any generalizations about EFL college students' oral discourse. Further studies based on a larger corpus need to be conducted to find general patterns about how EFL learners use these linguistic devices.

Finally, the formal nature of the task may also influence the conversational style. Some subjects' oral discourse may sound formal or unnatural, more similar to written language. Probably, some of the subjects have prepared a written note before they record the group discussion. Also, the formal nature of the task (performance and participation will be graded) requires each participant to have to make their

contribution in the group discussion task. Unlike naturally occurring conversation in which a speaker may feel free to decide whether s/he is going to join the conversation, every subject has to talk in the group discussion even though they are not interested in the topic. Future studies need to try to design more controversial or inspiring topics to encourage more interactions among group members.

Directions for future study

Despite the above-mentioned limitations, this case study intends to explore how intermediate EFL learners employ three linguistic strategies: telling stories, hedging, and collaborative construction of utterances. Future studies, based on a larger corpus consisting of equal amounts of male and female speech collected in more naturally contexts, are called for to provide a more generalizable account of the differences between a learner's interlanguage and the target language, with respect to certain linguistic forms. Since gendered behavior is situation- and context-dependent, future research needs to address these issues concerning the systematic variation between male and female speech. For instance, studies involving a different task (e.g., with different topics for discussion) should be undertaken to compare and contrast how male and female language learners might interact differently in different tasks.

Although the findings of this case study seem to be unable to provide a generalization about the use of three linguistic choices -- telling stories, hedges, and collaborative completions -- by EFL learners, this study attempts to encourage further studies on second language acquisition, with an emphasis on gender and language.

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Appendix I

Questions for Discussion

1. You've read Robert Frost's famous poem "The Road not Taken," in which the speaker talks about how difficult it is to make a choice. You've also read "Why

We Like Hard, Positive Choices" in which the author states: "We feel most free personally when we have a manageable number of positive alternatives." Answer the following questions about personal choices.

In which area of your daily life do you feel you have the most freedom/choices? the least freedom/choices? (for example, life style, food, clothes, school, friends…etc.)

2. "USE ENGLISH OR YOU'LL LOSE IT!" This English class is coming to an end. How can you practice English outside class? Think about ways of learning and using English outside class.

Appendix II Transcription Conventions (based on Coates 1996)

1. (.): A full stop in a parenthesis indicates a pause less than one second.
2. <>: Angled brackets give additional information, e.g.

    A: this is on tape you know

    B: <laugh>
3. […]: The symbol indicates that material has been omitted, e.g.

    I think I'm free to do anything […]
4. ? : A question mark indicates the end of a chunk of talk which is analyzed as a question, e.g.

    Like what? Get up early?
5. = : An equal sign at the end of one speaker's utterance and at the start of the next utterance indicates the absence of a discernible gap, e.g.

    Nicole: I always get up very =

    Miranda: = late!
6. Hedges identified in the data are indicated by bold-type fonts, e.g.

    You **can** see them in department store and you **can** go to the street.
7. For instance, Debbie (1) indicates the first turn of Debbie and Christine (2) indicates the second turn of Christine, and etc.