

## EXPRESSING VIEWS IN ENGLISH IN CHALLENGING ARGUMENTATIVE DISCUSSIONS AMONG TERTIARY LEVEL MALAY STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

Pragmatic norms differ in one respective culture to another. Interaction in the native language and in the second language may differ for a bilingual or multilingual. Speech act rules are part of linguistic competence, it is important to explore the English L2 learners' exploitation of their pragmatic and sociolinguistic knowledge of the target language. Due to the insufficient research contributions in the area of the Malay ESL students' verbal communication skills, this study focuses on explaining on the intercultural pragmatic aspects in the acquisition of speaking skills in the target language. Within the scope of tertiary level Malay students, the study aims to explain: (1) the nature of speech act patterns displayed by the students in their stance taking and (2) the students' rhetorical strategies in persuading the others to accept their opinion. This study analyses a recorded discussion of a group of 4 tertiary level Malay students on the topic "entertainment can assist learning". The analysis focuses on the rhetorical strategies, use of speech acts, stance-taking and as well as the participants' turn-taking in achieving their communicative goals or the perlocution. The findings show that the Malay ESL learners in this study do exhibit the proper pragmatic usage of the target language at this level, even though not fully native like. This gives an idea that they are able to perform the target language together with their acquisition of the English linguistic system and not just directly applying their L1 pragmatic norms to the target language.

**Keywords:** Pragmatics Competence, Speech Acts, Argumentative Discourse.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Pragmatic norms differ in one respective culture to another. How one interacts in native language and in a second language may differ for a bilingual or a multilingual. Speech act rules are part of linguistic competence, conversationalists presuppose, and make inferences of what is meant in the conversation that they are having. Malaysian context displays this aspect of diversity in respective cultural norms within the multi-races, an individual may display his or her styles in expressing arguments or stances uniquely attributed to ethnicity background when conversing in the mother tongue and also produce the same norm when conversing in another language repertoire or may even reflect the second language pragmatic means in the first language. As for second language learners, in this case ESL for Malays in their tertiary level of education, it is important to explore the learners' exploitation of their pragmatic and sociolinguistic knowledge of the target language.

The language skills required in asserting, voicing of opinions and stances, persuading, and expressing agreement or disagreement in having a discussion are crucial for the Malaysian students for their interpersonal skills and purpose of their future needs in the world of business, profession, and other social activities. Having the ability to express themselves in the second language is also a form of requirement for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), where they have to take the oral examination - testing on skills that are essential in argumentative structured discussion.

Past ESL studies in the Malaysian context have mainly focused on the technology and teaching approaches to writing skills (Yunus et al, 2012; Yunus et al, 2013), issues in Malay ESL students' compositions (Foroutan and Noordin, 2012; Ghabool and Kashef, 2012; Husin and Ariffin, 2012; Kaur et al, 2012; Loi et al, 2015; Maarof and Murat, 2013), and Malay ESL learners' literacy skills (Musa et al, 2012; Rozilawati et al, 2014). However in the range of 2012 to 2015, insignificant studies have focused on the Malay ESL learners' verbal production skills. Providing an insight of the ESL learners' interlanguage pragmatic performance in communicating their stance in argumentative settings is essential in the study of second language acquisition, especially in the aspect of learners' pragmatic competence. In this study, the main objective is to identify the forms and structures of argumentative discussion in English as a second language among advanced learners in their tertiary level studies. The study aims to explain: (1) the nature of speech act patterns displayed by the students in their stance taking and (2) the students' rhetorical strategies in persuading the others to accept their opinion.

## 1.1 Searle's Speech Act Classification

Progressing Austin's 1965 Speech Act Theory: indicating actions performed via words, Searle (1979) extended speech acts into five general classifications: declaratives, representatives, expressive, directives, and commissives. Making a difference to or changing the world by means of an utterance is classified as declarative. This incorporates judges in legal courtrooms giving verdicts or in the football field where a match is going on, soccer referees flying off yellow and red cards. In this regard, declaratives are valid or possible when the right authority, the right context and setting are involved. Representatives, represent what the speakers believe to be true in what is asserted or concluded. On the other side, expressive speech acts indicate the psychological emotion inserted in the speakers' conveyance. This is presented in the act of apologising, congratulating, thanking and such emotional expressions. In the act of requesting, suggesting and commanding, this is classified under directives where the message from the addressor to the addressee is to get the receiver do something. When one is committing to do something in the future, such as in making promises, offers or even threats, this is termed as the commissive speech act.

## 2.0 RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

In Johnstone (2008), the act of the interlocutor's persuading strategies is subdivided into: syllogism, quasilogical, presentational, and traditionally the use of stories. One of the most common strategies that people make use of is by convincing others via narrative accounts relating to past experiences and also to the more credible by reference to religious books. Johnstone (1989, as cited in Johnstone, 2008) defined persuasive strategies occupying the receiver's standpoint in a mode that deals with words and sounds coordinated rhythmically as 'presentational'. On another reserved and commonsensical platform, syllogism has to do with logical relations and parallel sets, it may also involve providing logical questions and providing definitions in justifying the persuasions intended. When ideas which are not necessarily facts, argued in a logical and mathematical manner; this is specifically phrased as quasilogical by argumentation theorist Perelman and his colleague Olbrechts-Tyteca (Perelman, Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, as cited in Johnstone, 2008).

Critical discourse analysis studies on rhetorical strategies have ranged from analysis of racist comments in the context of online news sites (Hughey and Daniels, 2013) and analysis of Barack Obama's 2012 speeches from the Systemic Functional Linguistics perspective (Kazemian and Hashemi, 2014). From the academic discourse, Loan and Pramoolsook (2015) have analysed the

rhetorical features of Vietnamese TESOL students' master's thesis introduction writeup. Ramos (2015), in his study, has investigated the error, register, and grammatical-rhetorical aspects of nursing students' case studies and thesis proposals. In relation to this major focus on written discourse, studying the rhetorical features of ESL learners in their spoken rhetorics is in addition significantly required to explain the processes of second language acquisition and intercultural pragmatic norms.

## **2.1 Stancetaking**

In this paper, it is also crucial to also clearly introduce the notion of stancetaking as people's linguistic and non-linguistic ways and means to express their suggestions and propositions to the receiver in the conversation (Johnstone, 2008). According to Biber and Finegan (1989), there are two types of stances: Epistemic and Affective. Epistemic stance, involving indicators such as adjectives, adverbs, verb forms and modals, is mainly concerned with the certainty or doubt speakers have about what they are expressing. Affective stance involves the speaker's assessment of people, issues and events. Lin's (2015) study on pragmatic force modifiers, suggests that in academic discourse, Chinese native speakers of English strategise their use of linguistic devices for varying pragmatic purposes if they are uncertain about the target language and to communicate effectively. Zareva (2013), claims that TESOL students who are native speakers of English use personal pronouns in their oral academic presentations to reflect their stance in accord to their academic field. This paper relates to the analyses of linguistic features identified in other studies on the linguistic performance of native and non native speakers of English in strategising and communicating their stance.

## **2.2 Turn-Taking**

Conversational rules either engage the current speaker selecting the subsequent speaker, or a particular speaker self-selects to be the next speaker taking the floor (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974). In sequencing within talk interaction, adjacency pairs are the basic paired utterances in turn-taking, where for example when the interlocutor asks a question (the first part), the next turn (second part) would normally be proceeded by the answer in reply. Adjacency pairs which show the order within a conversation have sociological and linguistic importance as well as reflecting the local nature of conversational structure (Schiffrin, 1994). In order to avoid the distribution problems associated with turn exchange, the participants follow "a basic set of rules governing turn construction, providing for the allocation of a next turn to one party, and coordinating transfer so as to minimize gap and overlap" (Sacks et al. 1974: 12). These rules have a "transition-relevance place" through which speakers

construct turns (Schiffrin, 1994) and these exchanges of turns result in understandings that are sequentially ordered and for which the participants are mutually accountable (Greatbatch, 1988).

Connor and Rozycki (2013) argue that in researching intercultural rhetorics, the study should consider the different linguistic features in each respective language; since for instance the linguistic elements of displaying cohesion and coherence in the language learners' L1 and the L2 may be varying patterns. In this study, one minor aspect that fills the holistic picture in the study of ESL learners' interlanguage features of expressing themselves in the target language argumentatively is to examine their turn-taking strategies.

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 The Discussion (Corpus Data)**

The students' discussion is basically based on their requirement to talk about current issues that are related to their experiences. A selection of topics associated to entertainment, technology, and social issues were given 2 weeks beforehand, and they may select the preferred matter for the discussion. Therefore, there was ample time for them to gather information for the selected issue. This is to make it spontaneous, relaxed and casual as possible for them, but at the same time formal in a way. The particular group in study, discussed on the issue; "entertainment can assist learning". The discussion between 4 participants recorded is more or less about 10 minutes.

#### **3.2 The Students**

These tertiary level Malay students are ESL learners in their Foundation in Information Technology Studies in a private college in Selangor Malaysia. Their exposure to the second language is approximately more than 10 years, taking consideration of their formal classroom instruction based English language exposure in Standard One in primary schooling.

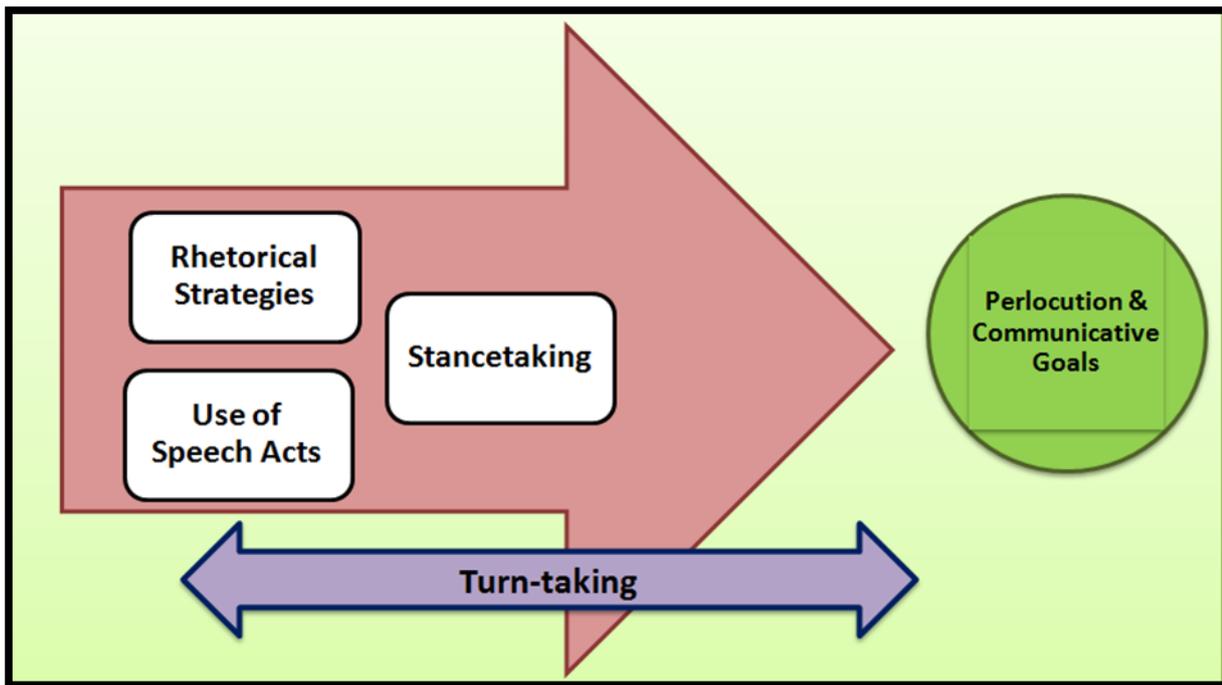
#### **3.3 The Recording**

The discussion was recorded via HP Presario CQ42 built-in webcam, with the intention that the students were able to see themselves on the laptop screen. They were left to discuss in a room without any observers.

### 3.4 The Analytical Process

The analysis of the transcribed recording covered the aspects of forms and structures: speech acts, rhetorical strategies, turn-taking; that the participants produce in the conversation to convey their opinions and convince the others in their arguments.

**Diagram 1: Communicating Strategies in Argumentative Discussion**



## 4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 4.1 The Use of “I think”

The prototypical epistemic phrase ‘I think’ (Kärkkäinen, 2003) initiated in the students’ conversation indicates the function of expressing ideas, in particular Searle’s speech act classification ‘representative’. However, in the analysis, the “I think” utterance also has other functions. Specifically the patterns detected are in the form of “I think” + (suggestion) and “I think” + (propose an idea/stance).

(1)

- (a) Arif: Okay. So **I think** we better start with Yin. Okay we start up with why  
 (b) can.. as I might say. From entertainment comes positive quality ye know

- (c)Yin: Well I begin. **I think** that. when we err to to we just err join the  
(d) (inaudible 02,45) we want to learn only.. but we want to be entertained, you  
(e) know? and like when we.when weee..we like talking about, about  
(f) something, so maybe we must we must err that the the people  
understand  
(g) what we talk about so for that **I think** the authority we want to, to say  
(h) something to show to people  
(i)Arif: so how how to  
(j)Pojan: How? How? mobile.....by what? By music or by video?  
(k)Arif: **I think** I get the point that you mean aah instead of doing format for formal  
(l) class you are using entertainment as attraction  
(m)Yin: yeah we can use the slideshow to attract people to entertain to eh to us or  
(n) we make err presentation (inaudible 03.59)

In (1), Arif's use of "I think" + 'we better start with Yin' in (a) which indicates that he is appointing Yin to be the next speaker (serves as a directive) and also marks as a suggestion to start the topic. On the other hand, Yin in (c) takes this as Arif passing the floor to him, to propose his stance. This signifies that Yin pragmatically understands Arif's utterance.

Yin's "I think" usage in (c) and (g), functions as the discourse marker that precedes the following stance or proposition that he takes as in "I think" + 'that. When we err to to we just err join' and in "I think" + 'the authority we want to, to say something to show to people'. This speech utterance form is also present in the norms of American English speakers (Kärkkäinen, 2003), which leads to the idea that these ESL learners are also applying similar sociopragmatic rules as their target language. Another instance in the use of the utterance in discussion is "I think" + 'I get the point that you mean aah instead of doing format for formal' in (k). Here, Arif is pointing that he understands and agrees to Yin's proposition in (c – h). Again, "I think" functions as a discourse marker that leads to the interlocutor's proposition.

An additional state relating to the student's use of "I think" as a discourse marker to reflect their agreement or disagreement is in (2-b) below: "I think" + 'I agree with Yin because. aaah we cannot'. In this case "I agree" is obviously indicating that Nafiz is expressing his agreement and acceptance to the issue that entertainment can also be a source assisting learning process in class.

(2)

- (a) Pojan: right (while nodding)
- (b) Nafiz: **I think** I agree with Yin because. aaah we cannot we cannot aah only use aa
- (c) book because the book is not suitable like we say aa to help you want to
- (d) learn about the subject we are too busy coz aa nowadays, aa students oo
- (e) love to aa play laptop aa smartphone smartphone and other thing aa they
- (f) are. easy to learn from the laptop or entertainment coz if if we give book aa
- (g) they not aa from from the textbook other book. aa
- (h) if we use the ..from entertainment like aa game or software or another
- (i) slideshow that aa in subject, aa easy to aa, easy to them to, aa know how to
- (j) aa get it the best way how to.. they can learn aa the subject

The analysis suggests that the students are not just direct-translating from their L1 (Bahasa Malaysia / BM), in this speech utterance “I think”, since it is directly translated in BM as “saya fikir”, “think” is “fikir”. However the standard everyday expression for this utterance functioning to reflect the point of view in BM is by the use of “rasa” as in “saya rasa” not “saya fikir”, which in English it will be translated as “I feel” which will be more towards the expressive function. In this sense, it is concluded that the learners’ are expressing “I think” in accord with the pragmatic norms in the English language, and not just directly translating from their L1 pragmatic system. It is noted that they can also use “I feel”, but this usage is not present in the discussion recorded. In the students’ use, they are only pragmatically expressing “I think” in the common structure “I think” + (stance/ suggestion), however in a more complex English structure relating to this is in the use of “I thought” for indexing alterations in the epistemic position of the speaker (Kärkkäinen, 2012). This complex use of “I thought” in changing one’s stance or argument is also absent in the analysed group discussion.

#### 4.2 Turn taking and adjacency pairs

Adjacency pairs which are the most basic foundation of social organization in turn taking usually consist of two turns. However, there are instances where there are three turns of actions where the third is referred to as minimal expansion (Schegloff, 2007). Although this third turn does not initiate another adjacency-pair sequence, it may have many functions.

(3)

- (a) Arif: ...today we are here together..
- (b) Yin: (1) yeah I know
- (c) Arif: (2) So, basically today we are gonna talk about something on the topic  
entertainment can assist learning
- (d) Yin: (3) oh

This is an extract from the beginning of the conversation where Arif introduces the topic for the discussion. In this case Yin's (d-3) "oh" indicates that he has been informed of the second part pair action, that is, he has been informed of the task that they have to do. Yin's "oh" here does not play any essential importance to the course of action; rather it is a contingent expansion which resulted from the nature of the second-part action (Kevoe-Feldman and Robinson, 2012).

Sacks et al. (1974), explains how a turn is constructed of 'unit types' which are sketches of talk and how a turn is completed when a single speaker produces one or more unit types. At the end of the transition-relevance place (Schiffrin, 1994), the mechanism for change of speaker occurs, with techniques such as addressing him/her by name, by asking a question or by the next speaker starting to speak when the unit type of the current speaker ends (Wilson, Wiemann and Zimmerman, 1984).

(4)

- (a)Arif: **I think** I get the point that you mean aah instead of doing format for formal  
(b) class you are using entertainment as attraction
- (c)Yin: yeah we can use the slideshow to attract people to entertain to eh to us or  
(d) we make err presentation (inaudible 03.59)

In this sequence in (4), Arif selects Yin as the next speaker by addressing him with "you mean" referring to Yin. Although it is not a question in itself, he is asking for clarification or reconfirmation of what Yin has said previously, which results in Yin being the next speaker.

Schiffrin (1994) describes a question to be constructed when the speaker does not have enough knowledge about a particular state of affairs and wants to get that knowledge.

(5)

- (a)Arif: so how how to
- (b)Pojan: How? How? mobile.....by what? By music or by video?
- (c)Arif: I think I get the point that you mean aah instead of doing format for formal

- (d) class you are using entertainment as attraction  
 (e)Yin: yeah we can use the slideshow to attract people to entertain to eh to us or  
 (f) we make err presentation (inaudible 03.59)

In (5) this question-answer sequence starts off with Arif in (5 a) asking Yin for clarification, then Pojan in (5 b) takes the floor instead of Yin, by also asking for information and at the same time giving options of his idea of possible answers. In this structure, we can see that the interlocutor (Pojan) is not actually inquiring for something that he does not know, but actually prompting a signal to the others or Yin in particular to strengthen his point of view. In (5 c), Arif indicates that he gets Yin's point (by referring to Pojan's inquiry in (5 b), even Yin did not answer his question. In addition to that, in (5 e-f) Yin answers both Arif and Pojan's question by agreeing to Arif's opinion in (5 c).

Another type of adjacency pair identified in this data is proposition- acceptance pair given below.

(6)

- (a)Arif: Okay. So I think we better start with Yin. Okay we start up with why  
 (b) can.. as I might say. From entertainment comes positive quality ye know  
 (c)Yin: Well I begin. I think that. when we err to to we just err join the  
 (d) (inaudible 02,45) we want to learn only.. but we want to be entertained, you  
 (e) know? and like when we.when weee..we like talking about, about  
 (f) something, so maybe we must we must err that the the people  
 understand  
 (g) what we talk about so for that I think the authority we want to, to say  
 (h) something to show to people

In this sequence Arif is suggesting Yin to speak first and by accepting to do so Yin completes the pair. However, in this sense, this adjacency pair analysed does not contribute in the learner's strategy in reflecting their stance or showing their disagreements to the others.

## **5.0 CONCLUSION**

The Malay ESL learners in this study do exhibit the proper pragmatic usage of the target language at this level, even though not fully native like. This gives an idea that they are able to perform the target language together with their acquisition of the English linguistic system and not just directly applying their L1 pragmatic norms to the target language. However, this study does not focus on the language errors in the students' conversation, since it is not our objective to analyse the syntactical errors. Further analysis on the same group's conversation in BM for a comparison of findings would be appropriate in the discussion on L2 to L1 pragmatic influence.

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