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LEARNER IDENTITY AND INTERACTIONAL COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Identity construction is very much influenced by interactional competence. Having a high level of interactional competence enables students to convincingly construct their desired identities. Learners of English as a foreign language may have a problem constructing their desired identities, especially if they are not particularly fluent in the language. This paper discusses the identity construction engaged in by a group of Jordanian learners of English at Mutah University, Jordan. The observed group consisted of 12 postgraduate students, from different majors, who learn English as preparation for their TOEFL exams. Data were analysed using a conversation analysis approach. The analysis reveals that the students managed to use various linguistic strategies in constructing their desired identities, whilst at the same time were disapproving of the identities constructed by the other group members whenever they felt the identities were inappropriate. This paper concludes that the Jordanian learners have sufficient interactional competence to develop common identities with other group members in their attempt to successfully complete the task given.

Contribution/ Originality: This paper contributes to the limited Conversation Analysis (CA) research in the Jordanian context. In addition, it provides novel insights into Arab learners' discursive behaviour in constructing their desired identities and displaying their interactional competence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, the higher education sector in Jordan has made it its mission to develop the foreign language abilities of university students. English, as the *lingua franca* of the world, holds the predominant role in foreign language education. To accelerate internationalisation in order to accommodate the growing trend towards globalisation, the Ministry of Higher Education of Jordan is financially supporting and encouraging more and more universities and other educational institutions to recruit foreign students, construct bilingual or multilingual learning and living environments and offer specific courses taught in English. With innovations in the curriculum, Mutah University's non-English majors are in urgent need of improving their English abilities before they can master the knowledge in their own areas of study.

Widely recognised reasons for the low achievement in English learning among Mutah University's non-English majors are their attitude and motivation. Unlike English majors, the students study specific knowledge and

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attend English classes to fulfil the requirements of the school, rather than because of personal needs and wants. Another problem that affects learning may be oversized classes, which on average consist of 50 students. To involve every student in classroom discursive activities, such big classes are often taught in pair-work or small-group settings. Accordingly, language-learning tasks such as information gaps or story narratives are often used to generate opportunities for students to use the target language while engaging in classroom activities. However, as noted by previous research on task interaction, there is often a mismatch between task-as-work plans and task-in-process (Breen, 1989; Jenks, 2009). In this context, unfortunately the size of the class usually turns the process of negotiation into chaos and 'off-task' (Markee, 2004) free talk takes place.

Teaching English to Mutah University's non-English majors appears to be a complicated and challenging job for most teachers. For English students in large classes, increasing opportunities for them to participate in group discussions or class activities is a top priority in them learning English via classroom interaction. Equally important are the issues in task-based research (Rashid, Mohamed, Rahman, & Shamsuddin, 2017). To better understand the actual goings-on in the classroom, learner-relevant approaches such as Conversation Analysis (CA), focusing on the turn-by-turn organisation of student task performances, should be employed to replace the predominant psycholinguistic approach.

1.1. Identity Constructions & Classroom Interactional Competence

Identity construction is an important aspect of interactional competence (Ab Rashid, Rahman, & Abdul Rahman, 2016; Granhenat & Abdullah, 2017). What is Interactional Competence (IC)? Garfinkel (1967) defined interactional competence (IC) as the 'methods' that interactants use to take turns, repair, open or close a conversation. For example, a call-taker is oriented into the role of a questioner to elicit information from the caller in a question-answer format. In the classroom context, the teacher and learner could adopt roles such as instruction giver-instruction follower, feedback giver, error provider and question and answer session participant, all of which create a sophisticated learning process in the classroom. The ability to invoke and manage appropriate roles in a given practice is essential in order to competently and recognisably participate in that practice (Rashid, Yunus, Azmi, Rahman, & Yusoff, 2016; Rine & Hall, 2011).

Prior studies on discourse and identity have discussed how interactants construct their discourse identities or participant roles through interaction. Cotterill (2019) conducted a survey involving 330 Chinese-speaking students at UK universities in an attempt to explore student decisions around using English names in classroom interaction. English name, in the context of Cotterill's study, is a direct translation of the Chinese term *Yingwen Mingzi* and refers to the wide range of non-Chinese names adopted by Chinese speakers, such as Andrew, Phil or James. The English names are used when it is felt that Chinese names are too hard for non-Chinese speakers to pronounce. In addition, it is perceived as a useful strategy to reduce the psychological distance between the non-Chinese and the Chinese in the classroom. Taking an English name means the Chinese students are taking a new form of identity in order to facilitate classroom interactions. Cotterill (2019) found that 255 out of 330 survey respondents (77.27%) used an English name and that they were highly encouraged by their teachers to do so (Nguyen, 2016). This study suggests that identity construction is an important element of successful classroom interactions, in the sense that members of the class need to share common ground in order for them to work as a group.

Roza (2019) reveals that the participants in his study constructed the identity of a translingual negotiator in developing classroom interaction. A total of 13 groups of Indonesian students completing a group work activity for a translation project were observed. It was found that the students consciously used four strategies in becoming an effective translingual negotiator, namely vocalisation, recontextualisation, interaction and entextualisation. As expanded upon by Roza (2019) vocalisation strategies include word coinage, foreignisation, code-switching and code-mixing. Recontextualisation strategies involve the use of features of linguistic form, such a formulaic Islamic greeting in Arabic preceding the talk. In terms of interactional strategies, the students used confirmation check,

check, clarification request and recast. Roza (2019) also highlighted that more competent students use simplification in communication, and less competent speakers use levelling as entextualisation strategies.

Lopez and Musanti (2019) examined how middle school English language learners in South Texas construct their identities as readers and writers in the classroom. Drawing on theories of identity, identity negotiation and transformative pedagogy, they both analysed the students' work and interviewed them. It was found that student perceptions as readers and writers are influenced by their experiences in reading and writing instruction. Lopez and Musanti (2019) argue that a unit of instruction can be a catalyst for learners to 'negotiate their identity and to reclaim themselves as effective readers and writers' (p.61).

The studies reviewed above show that identity construction and classroom interaction are intertwined elements contributing to a complex situation in the classroom setting which deserves further investigation. This study attempts to provide insights into this complex phenomenon by identifying how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students construct the identity of a group leader in small group task interactions by focusing on the interactional features of the leader and the group members from a CA perspective.

2. METHODOLOGY

The data was collected at Mutah University; a public university in Jordan. The university is located in Alkarak city in the South of the Kingdom of Jordan. When the data was collected, the university had a total of fourteen colleges and more than fifty departments offering Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral programs. The first and third authors have been working as English language teachers for more than 10 years at schools and universities. This extensive teaching experience has equipped them with essential membership knowledge including a sound understanding of the setting from which the data was collected. Membership knowledge helps conversation analysts to understand the data in a pre-analytic manner. Since the first and the third researchers have been both learners and teachers of English in Jordan, it is easy for them to adopt a participant perspective while analysing the data. Employing a multiple-case approach, two speaking classes at Mutah University were observed. The classes are taught by the same teacher and are speaking classes for graduate students from different majors.

2.1. The Teacher Participant

The teacher participant is an English teacher from Mutah University, where the data was collected. He obtained his PhD in Linguistics from Texas State University in 2012. Since then, he has been teaching English as a full-time lecturer at Mutah University. The data collected from his class consists of interactions between 12 postgraduate students performing speaking tasks as part of the TOEFL preparation course. Before the data collection commenced, the teacher and researcher conducted several discussions through email and in-person regarding the purpose of the study and the procedure for collecting data, along with other ethical issues. The teacher was given scanned copies of the task materials and a pre-task self-report. He was also asked to participate in task-based interaction by providing assistance and language support, such as giving task instructions, performing form-focused and meaning-focused repairs and giving definitions of ambiguous words.

2.2. The Learner Participants

The learner participants in this study were 12 college students (both male and female) from various majors such as English, Business Administration and International Relations at Mutah University in Jordan. These students were taught by the selected teacher in his English Speaking Training course, which aims to help them build up the ability to pass the spoken test of the course. According to the teacher's description before the data collection, most of the students could speak fluent English and were enthusiastic in participating in class activities. This statement was verified from the recordings and the researchers' observations. Knowing that the study involved videotaping their class activities, the students agreed with no reservations and even showed some

excitement about seeing themselves on camera. The other postgraduate students were registered for the Postgraduate TOEFL Preparation Course. The same teacher had taught most of the students in this class for more than a year. Overall, the students in this class showed fluency in English communication, albeit with an occasional lack of accuracy.

2.3. Analytic Lens – Conversation Analysis

This study adopted Conversation Analysis (CA) due to the relevance of its principles to the study. In CA, the researcher must not approach the data with prior theoretical or personal assumptions regarding the relevance of contextual or background details, which embodies the fourth principle of CA i.e. a bottom-up and data-driven analysis. In other words, CA is data-driven and the participants are relevant. This is the 'emic' position that CA inherits from ethnomethodology. By rejecting an 'etic' or analyst's perspective that usually draws on an external theoretical framework, the goal of CA analysts is to find out how participants in conversations understand or make sense of any given utterance.

All CA researchers must ask themselves the fundamental question: "Why that, in that way, right now?" throughout all stages of data collection. Two other important questions are: "What interactional business is being mediated or accomplished through the use of a sequential pattern?" and "How do participants demonstrate their active orientation to this business?" (Seedhouse, 2004).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The students oriented to several discourse identities to accomplish task-related actions. They engaged in learning processes as they negotiated meanings to achieve intersubjectivity, as shown in Extracts 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 below:

Extract 3.1:

1 L: +uh: we need to-choose +two group members +write

2 out something interesting +two members + ⌈need to stall

3 L1: ⌈stay: here

4 (0.2)

5 L1: uh ⌈huh ((nodding her head)) ⌈stage and ⌈let everybody knows

6 ⌈only two

The learner participants in this extract are about to write a short narrative essay. The group, which consists of four members, is led by L. As shown in the above extract, L constructed the identity of leader by initiating the task discussion, similarly to the chair of a meeting who starts the ball rolling. The 'pre-task opening' (Hellermann, 2008) employed by L is useful as it allows all group members to negotiate and decide how they will proceed with the discussion. Instead of being a dictator who controls how things should be carried out, L chose to be democratic by suggesting the plan. His leadership construction is affirmed by the way the other participants responded to his suggestion.

L's talk was delivered at a slow speed with many in-turn pauses. His hand movements, which almost synchronised with his speech, successfully secured the attention of his addressees. To promote the accountability to complete the task, he used the phrase 'we need' which served as the first pair part of an adjacency pair and opened the space with a strong invitation for the other participants to respond (Goodwin, 2011). L2 was observed making eye contact with L in the form of gazing when L expressed the need to complete the task, suggesting the identity of an attentive follower. Interestingly, there were several in-turn breaks in L's talk, but the talk was not interrupted by any other group member which suggests they had been closely monitoring the talk. At the end of the sequence, the participant used an acknowledgement marker 'uhuh' with head nods to display recipiency and, arguably, agreement with L's plan (5).

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Extract 3.2:

1 T: so:: let's assign

2 (0.7)

3 T: you? hehe ((looking at L)

4 L1: we want ⌈wewant+= +((L1 points her index finger at L3, L4 and then towards L5; holds up her right arm twice after pointing))

5 L: ⌈ohhhhh

6 L1: =Ahmad hihihihihi

Extract 3.2 closely follows the talk in Extract 3.1 with a few lines omitted. The teacher intervened in L's task plan, hence engaging in the act of repairing. This is because L had successfully initiated the discussion, but did not manage to get the two people to represent the group. The teacher suggested that L should be one of them, but with no obligation to do so, indicated with brief laughter 'hehehe'(line 3). As shown in the extract above, L1 had a good interactional competence where he could sense the teacher's message, thus immediately adopted the teacher's suggestion. The footing used by L1 is also strategic. Instead of using 'I', he used 'we' as the footing, hence making his personal response a consensus. He supported this corroboration by pointing his index finger first at L3, then L4, then towards L5 who had agreed with his choice. The laughter in line 73, together with the smiles on L2's and L3's faces, were an important indication that the other group members had come to their final choice with ease and that they felt Ahmad should be one of the representative leaders. This extract demonstrates further how identity is locally situated and constructed by the participant language. Through the interactional arrangements, this group of students accomplished part of the task activity and was able to proceed.

Extract 3.3:

1 L: okay, and+let me be the representative

2 ((gazes at all other group members))

3 L1:   yeah

4 (1.4)

5 L: mm :::::::::::::::::::: ((L1,L2, and L3 all gaze at him))

6 ((L starts to make some notes))

7 L: We need to plan the content together——+I will present the

8 essay on:::stage

9 ((L3 nods his head))

10 L1 so:: +we uh:::I have to:: write it down

11 (0.8)

12 L: hmm:::: can we+can we discuss +((waving his hands to the other group members))

13 L1: yes.yes ((nodding her head))

14 L: discuss okay?

15 L1: okay ((nodding his head))

L accepted the decision made by the group members that he would present the essay. Being a supportive follower, L1 gave a token acknowledgement 'yeah' in line 3 (Rashid, Yunus, & Wahab, 2018). As shown in line 4, L was buying time in organising his thoughts by taking a long pause before he revised his plan again in lines 7-8. The whole group gave him enough wait time to process his thoughts, which suggests that the group functioned well as a whole.

Towards the end of the conversation in the extract above, we can see that personal accountability and group accountability had been strategically managed by L as leader. When L1 used the personal footing 'I' (line 10), L quickly responded to this and repaired the talk to 'we', thus emphasising the accountability of the group members.

Again, L1 showed his respect by not challenging this and immediately agreed with L that it should not be done by him alone.

Extract 3.4:

1 L1: so what now? Can we (recap) anything we have brainstormed

2 (0.2) what is the main point? (point?) for (0.2) our essay (0.7)hehe

3 (0.3)

4 L: so (it's then) you can ⌈represent our group

5 L1 ⌈no(0.4) You should.

6 represent ⌈hihi

7 LLs: ⌈hihi

8 L: no ⌈you go

9 L1: ⌈no: you should go coz you are the leader. hehe

10 L: Can I make a decision as a leader? That I am staying ⌈here

11 L1:⌈no

12 L2: hihihi

13 (1.9)

14 L: you should GO((points at L1))

15 (0.3)

16 L1: no, I don't want

17 (0.4) ((L3 points at L1))

18 L: Now as a leader I ask you to go+⌈GO(

20 L1: ⌈no⌈nono=

21 L2: ⌈ahehehe

22 L: L2, you GO

23 L2: Sorry, not me

24 L: °MMM°

25 L2: I will not go

26 L1: can we(.) get consensus from (0.3) other (0.3) group members?(0.3)

27 (0.3)

28 L1: who: want(0.2) L to represent?

29 (0.5)

30 L3, L2, L1: ((gaze at L)) We want L

31 L1: so everyone agrees. L represent=

32 L3: =ok. No more discussion. L will GO

In this extract, we can see that being group leader was a challenging task for L. This is mainly because all group members have a high level of interactional competence. They managed to use various strategies to avoid representing the group in reading the narrative essay produced. This included raising their voices when urging L to 'GO', and getting support from other members to persuade L to go (lines 26-32). L tried to use his power as leader when asking L1 to represent the group, but was unsuccessful. This extract is strong evidence to suggest that the learners knew how to collaborate with others using language and other resources.

All four extracts analysed showed that there was a complex relationship between the learners' interactional competence and the construction of their desired identities in task interaction. This identity was fluid. As we can see in Extract 3.1, L was a successful leader in initiating the group discussion, but later in Extract 3.2 we can see that he was not very successful when he still needed help from the teacher to keep on-task interaction going. In Extract 3.3, we can see that he managed to repair his identity to become a successful leader again in the sense that he

achieved the creation of awareness for group accountability. However, in the last extract, we can see that he was totally powerless as a leader when he failed to get L1 to represent the group.

As for group membership, we can see that the group members also had several identities. In Extract 3.1 for example, they constructed identities of good followers ready to give full support to complete the task. In the later extracts, we can see that they were strategic not to represent themselves as people who would obey everything instructed by L. In doing so, they strategically obtained consensus from the other group members hence avoided having themselves considered as the only problematic or rebellious group member. In short, group leadership and membership in the task interaction were a co-constructed process, which encompassesed both the leading speaker's talk and his hearers' operations.

4. CONCLUSION

In classroom interactions, identity construction is an essential trait of interactional competence. The ability to use language as a resource to mediate classroom learning and construct desirable identities is central to the notion of classroom interactional competence. During interactions, class members have several roles, such as opening and ending conversations, asking questions, making errors, correcting errors and so on. Having such roles in certain settings enables the competence of participants in that process. This study examined identity construction in classroom discourse. Identity in this study was found to be fluid. It confirms the CA perspective of identity as an achievement and an interactional tool. The students in this study employed several strategies in constructing their desired identities, both verbal and non-verbal, whilst at the same time challenged other members' identities if they were considered inappropriate. The discursive shift of identity was proven through the use of different linguistic resources such as shifts in pronouns to indicate shifts in positioning. It was in the interactional arrangements that the students were able to engage in the learning process, construct desirable identities and accomplish the tasks.

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