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LISTENING AND SPEAKING SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN A TAIWANESE TERTIARY EFL CONTEXT: MANIPULATING POWER-IN-INTERACTION FOR PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT

The sociocultural theory of second language acquisition (SLA) highlights the significance of social interaction in language learning, especially oral language proficiency. How to provide opportunities for students' participation in social interaction has long interested language researchers and teachers. However, research on classroom discourse has focused more on teacher-student rather than student-student interactions. In a culture such as Taiwan where teachers have been traditionally regarded as a symbol of both knowledge and authority, the social interaction between teacher and students to some extent constrains or obstructs students from participation or displaying orientations, especially negative ones. The asymmetrical power relations may partially account for students' limited participation. If this is true, I assume that peer interactions, in which students have relatively symmetrical power relations, can be a fruitful locus for investigation. From a pedagogical point of view, they offer students valuable opportunities in terms of social interaction for language learning. On the other hand, peer interactions offer data sources of empirical research for investigating how learners really interact and co-construct social relations in the local context.

This is a qualitative case study in which I combined the concepts of ethnography and ethnomoethodology to approach how this specific group of students used the relatively symmetrical encounters to display their interactional power and the participation patterns. The subjects were freshmen students in an evening program in a Taiwanese university, and like the majority of students in Taiwan, the development of oral English proficiency was a commonly-shared goal of their seeking membership in the particular Department. This urged me, as a teacher, to incorporate two interactive learning activities, group discussions and oral presentations, with the hope to offer them opportunities for oral practices. In addition, as a researcher, I was keen to know what students really did or said and how they interacted with each other and participated when they were released from the teacher-fronted teaching. To explore students' participation, I employed the notion of "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) as the major framework. Another purpose

of the study is to relate the macro-membership as English majors to their micro-membership in specific communicative events designed to provide oral practice.

The data showed that in both the group discussion and oral presentation activities, the students overtly demonstrated their own negative and positive orientations by taking different situational roles in the interaction. The findings also showed students employed different discursive strategies to overcome linguistic limitations and display and justify their 'power-in-interaction' in terms of acceptances and refusals, or took advantage of linguistic superiority or favourable roles and situations to impose, control or defy the agenda. In addition, by tactically taking advantage of the timing and opportunities for personal orientations, they actively displayed different patterns of participation. The active participation in interaction demonstrated that they did not shy away from showing their power-in-interaction by positioning themselves according to their preferred orientations. On the contrary, they realized their different roles in immediate communication events or communicative activities by seizing the opportunities that were favorable to them. While the discourse data exhibited active micro membership in the immediate communicative situations as a member of the local community, students' accounts in the written and interview data presented interconnection between their macro-membership in the advanced English learning community as English major students

The findings of this study gave strong support for the view that in peer interaction students can demonstrate strong power-in-interaction despite linguistic limitations. This kind of display of power-in-interaction has not commonly found in teacher-student interaction in Asian learning contexts. One reason contributing to this lively and enthusiastic participation may be the removal of teacher-control, which allowed the students significant space for displaying personal and linguistic orientations. Another reason may be this specific cohort of students had ambitious expectations of being an English major student. The active membership in the local communications was a reflection of their solid shared identity as a member in this advanced learning community.

The most critical implication from this study is on the concept of participation, which may need to be redefined in interpreting Taiwanese EFL learners' participation in classroom discourse. Most of these students were not reticent in participation. This participatory force may involve various factors such as their claim to the shared identity as English majors, the shift from teacher-fronted to student-fronted classroom learning, the reduction of teacher-control, and the activities selected. Thus, from a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest the following. (1) Social and contextual factors need to be taken more into account when encouraging and evaluating students' participation. (2) Adult language learning classrooms in Taiwan can work not only as a learning community but also as a community of practice, in which participants can learn how to take part in various learning and social practices at the same time, which in turn contributes to the development of their oral skills. The functions of this community need to be valued, enhanced and cultivated (Wenger et al., 2002). (3) Tertiary students can benefit from more substantial opportunities for using English for communication in the language classroom which can invite them into participation, such as the activities employed in this study. (4) In terms of oral proficiency, the concept of communicative competence in the Taiwanese EFL context requires the incorporation of sociolinguistic, discourse and intercultural competences.