

Framing, Stance and Style in Thai-English Group Discussions

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1.0 Introduction

This paper presents the results of a study of Thai university students' use of English in the speech event of group discussion. Our general aim has been to identify, analyze and describe the discourse features of their language use in this speech event. In particular, we were interested in how the Thai students structured or organized their discussion. Participating in a discussion involves expressing one's opinion and reacting to the opinions expressed by others, and we were also interested in how the students did this, especially, the lexical and grammatical resources that they made use of in taking a stance.

The speech event of group discussion is an important one for university students in Thailand and other countries where English is widely used and taught. Some Thai university students continue their studies overseas in English first-language environments where group discussions are an important class activity. Many other students find employment after graduation with foreign firms and discussion skills are also important in this context. Thus, there is a positive value in identifying and describing the discourse features which characterize this speech event as such information can be used in the development of teaching materials to train students to perform effectively in discussions. Such training may be desirable in light of Asian students' reluctance or inability to participate effectively in group discussions (Cheng 2000, Liu & Littlewood 1997, Jones 1999).

This paper is organized as follows: In Section 2 we review previous research in areas related to the present study. Section 3 provides a description of our data and methodology. In Section 4 we describe our main findings and consider similarities between our findings and those reported in other studies. Finally, our conclusions are presented in Section 5 along with some discussion of implications for further research in this area.

2.0 Related research

2.1 Framing

We know of no research studies of Thai-English speakers' performance in group discussion, but Japanese and American English speakers' performance in group discussions have been studied.

Watanabe (1993) made a comparative study of Japanese and American English speakers in group discussions. She found notable differences in how the Japanese speakers and the American speakers started and ended their discussions, in turn-taking, in topic shift, and in the types of reasons speakers used to support their opinions. She explained her findings as cultural differences arising from different cultural values.

Watanabe's work was based on the theory of "framing." This theory is derived from Bateson's (1972) concept about different levels of communication. When a speaker makes a statement he not only communicates referential information, but at the same time sends a signal or message about how that information is to be interpreted. In other words, there is a referential message and another metacommunicative message indicating the speaker's intention about how the referential message is to be interpreted. The metacommunicative message can be expressed verbally or non-verbally, through the choice of words and syntactic patterns, through prosodic features and through gestures. Metacommunicative messages have an important role in communication since a speaker's referential message can usually be interpreted in multiple ways and the metacommunicative message helps the listener to correctly interpret the speaker's intention. For Tannen (1984: 23) these metacommunicative messages are like "frames" because of the way they frame the discourse, thereby limiting possible interpretations and enabling the listener to understand the speaker's intention.

The concept of frames is relevant to cross-cultural communication because it provides a principled way to account for the miscommunication that often occurs between speakers from different cultures. Even though they may be speaking the same language, speakers from different cultures do not necessarily share the same expectations about how to use language in a given context or speech event. In other words, speakers from different cultures may have different "frames" for the same speech event and their different expectations may lead them to interpret what others say in ways that are different from what was intended, resulting in miscommunication. Watanabe concluded that Japanese and American speakers had different frames for the speech event of group discussion and that this was a main reason for Japanese students' difficulty in participating in group discussions with American students and their resulting frustration.

2.2 Stance

Participating in a group discussion involves expressing one's ideas and opinions and agreeing or disagreeing with those expressed by others. Thus, it entails taking a stance and evaluating ideas and opinions that are presented. Of course, taking a stance is something that normally occurs in most contexts of language use. When people use language they not only refer to entities and make propositions, but they also signal their attitudes toward and evaluations of these things. This is done explicitly and inexplicitly in various ways. In English it is expressed through the use of modal verbs, adverbial expressions, evaluative adjectives, complement clauses, comparative forms and other

means. Stance-taking is thus a multi-faceted function and its various facets have been investigated quantitatively and qualitatively in research studies. The collections of papers in the volumes edited by Hunston and Thompson (2000) and Englebretson (2007) include seminal studies in this area and illustrate the range of approaches to research in this field. Englebretson's introduction to the 2007 volume provides a useful discussion of the concept of stance and the various perspectives from which it has been studied. Various terms have been used and there have been different perspectives, but Englebretson points out that the study of stance "...marks an orientation toward conceiving of language in terms of the functions for which it is used, based on the contexts within which it occurs." (2007: 1)

Some of these studies have been particularly useful to us in analyzing our data. Keisanen (2007) studied how English speakers established their stance through interaction, dealing specifically with how negative *yes/no* questions and two types of tag questions were used to challenge a prior speaker. Koshik (2003) examined how the *wh*-interrogative was used in challenges, and Heritage (2002) investigated "argumentative challenges" in news interviews.

2.3 Cultural issues

Teachers often comment on Asian students' reluctance or difficulty in participating effectively in group discussions, and this is often ascribed to cultural differences (e.g. Cortazzi & Jin 1996). But some researchers have rejected this explanation as over-simplistic and have sought a more nuanced explanation. Cheng's (2000) research indicates that many Asian students have a strong desire to participate in classroom activities, and that when they are quieter than their counterparts it is because of situation-specific rather than cultural factors. Likewise, Liu & Littlewood (1997) found that Chinese students were not reluctant to take active speech roles and in fact liked classes with communicative tasks, however they were inhibited by their lack of experience and confidence. Jones (1999) cited language difficulty and general shyness as contributing factors, but highlighted the role of cultural differences, particularly students' unfamiliarity with the informality and discourse norms of group discussions. He concluded that non-native students needed to become aware of the values and beliefs underlying group discussion and needed training to acquire the necessary interactional skills for discussion.

Watanabe's study of Japanese and Americans performance in group discussions was the starting point for the present study. We undertook this study with the general aim of investigating whether Thai English speakers would exhibit similar discourse patterns to those of either the American English speakers or the Japanese speakers in a similar type of group discussion activity. We felt that it could be interesting to see how much the framing features used by the Japanese speakers were evident in the discourse of Thai speakers in the same speech event.

Thailand and Japan have distinct cultures and unrelated languages, and yet cultural studies have identified values which seem very similar. For instance, in Japan there is a concept of *giri* which is

roughly defined as obligation or moral debt. Japanese are deeply conscious of what they have received from others, and this consciousness and the sense of obligation that goes with it influence what Japanese speakers say and how they speak to others. The concept of *giri* can be compared to the Thai concept of *bunghun* which is translated roughly as “indebted goodness.” Friendships and family relationships are seen as being based on *bunghun*, and this has been described as a psychological bond between a person who gives help and favors and another person who receives them and remembers them and is ever-ready to reciprocate (Komin 1990). Another example of a shared cultural trait would be the well-known preference of Japanese for what Watanabe (1993) calls “non-confrontational communication.” This can be compared to the *Kreng jai* attitude of Thai speakers, which has been described as, “feeling considerate for another person, not want to impose or cause other person trouble, or hurt his/her feeling,” (Komin 1990), and this attitude leads Thai speakers to avoid criticizing others and to respect each other’s faces. It seems likely that these kinds of shared cultural values would be reflected in similar ways of speaking.

3.0 Data and methodology

The data for our study was obtained by video-taping group discussions of fourth-year, English-major Thai university students holding group discussions. Each group consisted of four speakers, two of the groups had two female and two male speakers and the other two groups had four female speakers. Thus, there were altogether 16 participants. All but one were 21 or 22 years old. They had not taken TOEFL, TOEIC or other standardized tests, so we did not have a standardized measurement of their proficiency. However, it was clear that they were quite fluent in spoken English. All of the participants had had at least 8 years of English study prior to entering the university, and some of them had had 12 years. None had studied abroad. All participants had taken courses in listening and speaking as part of the curriculum for English-major students, and at the time data was collected they were taking a course entitled “Conversation and Discussion 3” in which they had been studying techniques for speaking in formal situations, including such discourse functions as persuading, agreeing and expressing reservations. As part of the Conversation and Discussion course they had taken part in group discussions during class on contemporary topics. Group discussion was therefore not an unfamiliar speech event for them.

The participants were instructed to discuss three topics, two of which were posed as questions: 1. What kind of job would you like to have in the future? 2. University students should wear uniforms when they attend class. Do you agree? Why or why not? 3. Discuss misunderstandings that are likely to occur between native English speakers and Thais because of language and cultural differences. Give specific examples. The participants were not given the topics beforehand because we didn’t want them to plan in advance what they would say; we wanted to elicit unplanned speech. However we chose

topics that were familiar to the students and on which they could be expected to have opinions.

The participants were given no further instructions about the topics or how to conduct their discussion. After checking to verify that the students understood the instructions, the video-taping was started and the researchers exited the room. The groups concluded their discussions within 35–45 minutes.

4.0 Results

4.1 Opening the discussion

There was no preliminary talk about how the discussion would be conducted in any of the groups, but there was no evidence of interactional trouble or confusion arising from not making a plan about how to conduct the discussion. The discussions began with one speaker asking another about the first topic, e.g. “After graduated what would you like to do?” In response, the nominated speakers gave brief answers, naming the job (e.g. “Personally I think I’d like to be an air hostess.”), and sometimes providing a brief reason (e.g. “I would like to work in the journalist line of job and I like to meet many people...and...and sometimes it challenges me to work...er...maybe risky.”) Other speakers responded to these answers with questions or comments that invited the speaker to elaborate (e.g. “So, you think that the good job for you is...er...that that job must be like a risky or give you...er...high profit?”).

This non-structured approach to opening the discussion was in contrast to the Japanese speakers in Watanabe’s study. Watanabe found that Japanese speakers began and ended their discussions in a very deliberate way. At the outset they made a plan for how they would carry out the discussion, and in the discussion they followed a pattern in which each speaker took a main turn, and these turns were in order according to the speaker’s age and gender. In contrast, the American speakers in her study began their discussion without a plan and took turns freely in no particular order. Thus, on this point, the Thai English speakers were similar to the American English native speakers.

4.2 Closing the discussion

Three of the discussion groups ended their discussions rather abruptly. For example, in one group when the participants seemed to have exhausted the final topic, one speaker made a comment indicating that it was time to stop, “It’s time for lunch now,” then another speaker made a supportive, follow-up comment, “Just walk out, it walk out,” and a third speaker added, “Bye-bye.” That ended the discussion. There was no checking to see if anyone had anything else to say. Nor was there any kind of summary of conclusions reached or wrap-up in these three groups.

However, the fourth group concluded their discussion in a more deliberate way. When the third topic seemed to be at an end, one participant returned to the first topic to sum up the group’s conclusion, and other members joined in and contributed to the summing up:

- (1) Sa: For the first topic, the kind of job that we would like to be is depends on each person. The best...
- Sh: Depends on the experiences also.
- Sa: The best factor might be their, er, their money, their studies and some, er, advantages they get from job.
- Sh: I notice that everyone would think of money first, right?
- Sa: Yeah, that's right. She would like something challenge her I think.
- Sh: Something challenge.
- Tn: Something challenge but we all like money.
- St: I just want to do what I like, what I'm happy for.
- Sh: So she's the minor group. We all think of money first.
- Sa: We're majority. (laughing)
- Sh: We majority, so we can conclude that Thai people (inaudible) are about, er...
- St: Love money!
- Sh: 70% love money! They think of the money first for their future job.
- Sa: And want everything comfortable, um, and the, er, second topic about uniforms...
- Th: Sorry, we...
- Sh: There are two side, there are two sides.
- ?: Yeah, yes
- Sh: Some agree and some disagree about the uniform.
- Th: And the...
- Sh: And we have already concluded.

In this group, there was a collaborative summing-up though it did not include conclusions about the third topic. There was no such summing-up in any of the other three groups.

4.3 Topic shift

Besides the opening and closing of the discussions, there were some smaller beginnings and endings at topic switch points. A pattern was identifiable here. In each group, the same speaker initiated the second and third topics, and did so by announcing the topic and selecting the person who would speak about it first either by asking a question and directing it to them or by nominating them as in (2):

- (2) Sa: "I see. So let's talk about the last topic. Discuss misunderstandings that are likely to occur between native English speakers and Thais because of language and cultural differences. Give specific examples. And the first person to share idea is Chris."

Occasionally, the topic shift would be preceded by some checking to see if anyone had anything else to say about the previous topic, but more often one speaker just shifted to the next topic without

checking.

Although within each group the same person initiated the shift to the second and third topics, this speaker did not seem to have the same status of “Assumed Leader” in the way that the Japanese speakers in Watanabe’s groups did. In the Thai groups the person who initiated the topic shift did not close the discussion by checking to see if anyone had anything further to say and then announce the end as the assumed leaders in the Japanese groups did.

4.4 Presenting reasons

The first topic for discussion was, “Which job would you like to have in the future? Why?” To respond to this question, speakers needed to present reasons for their choice. Although this assigned topic asked the speakers what kind of job they wanted and why, many of the speakers initially said only what kind of job they wanted without mentioning their reasons until they were prompted to do so by the other speakers. In discussing the reasons for their job choices, the Thai English speakers exhibited a very cooperative style of interaction. The discussion proceeded by discussing each participant’s preferences, but while one person’s preferences were being discussed, the individual concerned did not necessarily take longer turns than the other participants, though s/he did have more turns than the others. It was not a case of one participant being the primary speaker and other participants taking listener roles, but rather there was more equal turn-taking and cooperative management of the talk. There was a joint probing of the reasons on the part of the speaker who furnished the reason and the others. The others participated in the development of the discourse in several ways: (1) by asking direct questions, (2) by offering possible expansions of the reasons, (3) by giving evaluations, (4) by commenting on relevant points, and (5) by making various kinds of backchannel responses, both verbal and non-verbal (e.g. rephrases, minimal verbal responses, nods, eye contact, and so on). In the following excerpt, what is being discussed is I’s preferred job and her reasons for preferring it, but T and F’s questions, expansions, and commentary play an important part in developing the discussion:

(3) I: Personally I think I’d like to be an air hostess.

F: Air hostess?

I: Yes

F: Why?

I: I think it’s a good job.

T: Yes, absolutely

I: very, very high salary

T: eighty thousand or... something like that, eighty thousand

I: per month

T: yes, per month

F: It’s very interesting.

The joint construction of discourse which is exemplified in (3) above can be considered typical of the Thai English discourse in the speech event of group discussion.

The cooperative, interactive style exhibited by the Thai English speakers contrasts with the style used by Japanese and American English speakers in Watanabe's study. Watanabe noted that Japanese speakers' presentation of reasons exhibited two features: (1) chronological organization and (2) detailed description of past contexts. The presence of these two features suggested that the Japanese framed their reasons as "stories." Neither of these features was evident in the Thai English speakers' presentation of reasons. Their way of presenting reasons was closer to that of the Americans' which Watanabe described as relatively brief and to the point. She characterized it as "reporting." But the more dialogic, interactive style of the Thai English speakers contrasted with that of both of these groups. The Thai English speakers' interactive style will be discussed further in Section 4.6.

4.5 Taking a stance

"Taking a stance" which is understood generally as expressing one's attitude or evaluation toward a topic under discussion, is very common in most contexts of language use, though as Conrad & Biber (2000) have shown, the linguistic devices used to express one's stance vary according to register. There is also variation as to how explicitly a speaker (or writer) encodes his stance. In a group discussion an understood purpose of the interaction is to exchange opinions, and thus speakers can be expected to express their stance openly, though social relationships may constrain how strongly a speaker can express a stance that is at odds with others'. For example, a speaker may avoid expressing a conflicting opinion or mitigate the force of his expression when speaking to a person of higher social status. Taking this kind of conciliatory approach helps to maintain smooth relationships enabling speakers to live in harmony with each other. Living in harmony is seen as a key cultural value by Thais (Komin 1990).

It is reasonable to assume that whether or not a speaker takes a stance on an issue and how strongly they do so is related to their familiarity and experience with the issue. In setting the discussion topics we deliberately chose one topic about whether or not students should be required to wear school uniforms because we felt this would be a topic close to the participants' lives and on which they could be expected to hold opinions. At Khonkaen University where the participants were students, students were required to wear uniforms in class.

The topic was presented as a "should" statement followed by a yes/no question and a wh-question: "University students should be required to wear uniforms when they attend class. Do you agree? Why or why not?" The form in which the topic was presented instructed the participants to take a stance, individually and/or as a group. However, there were very few instances in which a participant stated unequivocally that s/he agreed or disagreed, and only one case in which a group attempted to articulate a group stance at the end of this part of the discussion. And in that single case, the group's

conclusion was divided:

(4) Su: So we agree in wearing uniform in some part and we are, er, we all agree

Si: We all agree?

Su: We agree both in wearing casual in some part.

?: OK

In one group, three of the four participants said, “agree,” at the outset, but in the other groups participants did not take a stance at the beginning, and their stance emerged only through the course of the discussion in response to questions, challenges or supporting moves from others—or when they themselves questioned or challenged or gave support to others. This is evident in the following excerpt, which exemplifies several of the discourse features common to the Thai students’ discourse in the group discussion speech event:

(5) I: Let’s talk about wearing uniform when we’re attend class.

F: What do you think about it? Do you agree?

T: Agree sometimes and disagree sometime.

W: Why?

T: Because um...there both advantages and disadvantages.

I: What about advantages?

T: In my opinion wearing a uniform...um it’s safe because have just only one uniform... I mean one pattern of the uniform that you can wear in university but

I: We don’t have to care much about the fashion.

T: about fashion or something like that

F: The cost of uniform is cheap.

T: compare with those fashionable

I: It’s cheaper that student’s uniform.

F: It suit for the children.

I: It’s like a the... we have to respect to the place or the teacher.

T: Wearing a student uniform you don’t have to care much... of wearing the same clothes to attend the class and your friends recognize that you wear the same clothes.

I: Hey, this dress you ever wear it, some think like that.

W: I think sometime er uniform have fashion. It’s in in trend because you have... you have to er... short skirt or long skirt. I think right now fashion is in the uniform.

I: Yes absolutely but I think in comparing with the... like a... private. It’s less than

F: Have you ever thought that casual clothes make you free and have more comfortable than the uniform, you can wear jeans, T-shirts, and something you like. You like freedom. And, it urges you to...

T: get ready to do any activity in university

F: Yes, it's very comfortable.

I: Because I don't think uniform is make me uncomfortable, so I think I can wear uniform for another activities except study or attend class.

F: I've some problems about

T: riding motorcycle

I: riding motorcycle

F: riding when I wear a short skirt. But, if I can wear jeans, it's more comfortable.

T: In my opinion... Um... we should be allowed to wear a private clothes in some subject.

F: In some subjects? Such as...?

T: Such as... a class that we have a foreign professor because I have heard that in America they don't care too much about the student uniform... students can wear whatever they want to.

W: I don't think so. Er... I think sometimes, I think some foreigners, er... care something like a jean. Some... some people don't like to... don't like as you wear it.

T: Depend on each professor like ajarn John.

I: I think some professor don't think for about Thai culture.

T: It's more suitable Thai traditional for wearing uniform in class.

I: I think some professor will appreciate with it because in their country have not this culture

F: What about respectation? Do you think that wearing uniform means that you have more respectation to your teacher?

I: Yes, because I think uniform is consider polite and if you wear a jean or sandal, the teacher will look at you as you are not student.

F: Do you think that only looking for appearance is not enough? I think that respectation is come out from our minds.

W: I think because the uniform...

I: Yes, but how can you show it?

F: Yes, I can show it, I'll pay attention in class, I'll obey the law.

This excerpt (5) exemplifies the tendency to develop a stance collaboratively through interaction. The speakers use questions, repetition, rephrases, sentence completions, overlapping (simultaneous speaking), and latching (initiating a turn without pause after the previous turn) to collaborate on a collective stance. However, this is not to say that all of the participants agree completely with the stance which is being developed; in (5) F expressed reservations about the underlying reasons.

The tendency to develop a stance collaboratively through the course of the interaction can be considered a feature of the Thai English speakers' discourse in this speech event. However, it is only a tendency; it was not observed in every case. In one group there was a protracted discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of uniforms without anyone taking a clear stance for or against uniforms.

There were some differences of opinion on the topic of required uniforms. Although most of the

participants were in favor of uniforms, in three groups one or more participants were opposed to students being required to wear uniforms. The differences in opinion led to disagreement. However, the disagreement was not expressed strongly, in most cases it was hedged or indirect. The Thai English speakers used a tactic that is often used by native speakers (Kotthoff 1993): prefacing a disagreement with an expression of partial agreement. For example, one speaker, prefaced her disagreement with another speaker by saying, “(Name), I agree with you some point...” There were instances in which disagreement was expressed strongly, but these tended to be at points where there was teasing or laughter which mitigated the confrontational effect of disagreeing. The following excerpt comes from the beginning of one group’s discussion about uniforms:

- (6) T: Thank you. Er, I...I think, er, in the past it not necessary to...to wear uniform. But however I think that it is necessary because in the future we have to...to wear uniform when we work. So I think we have to...to practice or to...to make it, er, like our happy.
S: I’m afraid you are sadly mistaken. Because some of jobs, er, do not need uniform.

In this exchange, the disagreement was mitigated by the ironic tone of the expression that S used, which made his comment sound teasing rather than confrontational. An informal, jocular tone had already been established in the previous turns in which S commented on T’s uniform, noting that he was the only one in the discussion group who was wearing a uniform “correctly.” The other participants interpreted this comment as humor, and it set the tone for the exchange that ensued.

Speakers used various techniques to disagree indirectly. One common technique was through the use of questions. One speaker in particular used questions repeatedly to disagree with or challenge her interlocutors. For example, in arguing against uniforms (in (5) above) she asked, “Have you ever thought that casual clothes make you free and have more comfortable than the uniform?” At a later point in the same discussion (reproduced below) she used two questions in one turn to challenge her interlocutor’s logic and to create an opening for presenting her own view:

- (7) F: What about respectation? Do you think that wearing uniform means that you have more respectation to your teacher?
I: Yes, because I think uniform is consider polite and if you wear a jean or sandal, the teacher will look at you as you are not student.
F: Do you think at only looking for appearance is not enough? I think that respectation is come out from our minds.

The difficulty of disagreeing, especially if one is in a minority, was illustrated in an example from a group in which three of the participants were in favor of uniforms and one was not. The one who was against uniforms had 12 turns out of 111 turns on the topic of uniforms, but until her sixth turn (the 49th turn in the discussion of uniforms), she was not able to articulate her disagreement. In earlier turns she was either cut off before she could disagree, or seemed to falter before making her point. She signaled her opposing stance early in the discourse; when others argued that uniforms were

desirable because many children dressed improperly, going barefoot, she contested the validity of this argument saying, “But have all of you guys wear untidy wear.” However, she desisted without pressing the point further or trying to dissuade the others. Only near the end was she finally able to disagree with the main point: “Maybe a lot of people disagree, cannot accept your idea.” But in phrasing it this way, she placed the locus of disagreement on others and not herself and thereby averted direct confrontation.

The tendency to avoid disagreement or mitigate it by expressing it indirectly pointed to a more general tendency to avoid confrontation. This was one of the prominent features of Japanese discourse which was noted by Watanabe and which influenced the discourse style of the Japanese participants in her study.

4.6 Interactive Style

One of the most notable discourse features of the Thai-English discussions was the high level of involvement between the speakers. In unplanned spoken discourse between two or more speakers joint construction of text is usual. Speakers normally share in the management of the discourse—there is some give and take involved in opening and closing a conversation, in wrapping up topics and introducing new ones and in turn-taking. For instance, in closing a conversation there are usually several turns during which the participants check whether their interlocutors have anything further to say before ending the conversation. For one participant to end a conversation abruptly, without going through these steps, would be seen as inappropriate or rude—a violation of social conventions. Of course, there is variation in the degree to which participants contribute to a discussion and to the management of a discussion. No doubt this variation is related to many factors such as the role of the speakers, their ages, the level of intimacy or distance between them, the cultural background, the topic, the social context, and so on.

There was a high level of involvement among the speakers in the discussions by the Thai English speakers. The group discussion texts contained a number of discourse features that are associated with interactiveness. Several of these can be seen in (5), the discourse extract quoted above. The interactive discourse features which characterized the Thai English group discussions include the following:

1. Informal Tone. The tone of the discussions was informal, in fact it could be described as playful and teasing. The participants were classmates and were used to interacting with one another on a casual basis.
2. Unordered Turn-taking. There was no order to the turns. At some points one speaker nominated the next, either by saying their name, or by asking them a question, or through eye contact. But most of the time, the speakers self-nominated. The direction of the conversation was not completely straight and linear. For example, one participant might ask a question of another

and before the other had a chance to respond, someone else would say something. There were numerous examples of this.

3. Turn-length. Turns were very short. In fact, in the four discussions there were only four instances of a turn more than 100 words in length. One of the discussion texts contained 3 long (100+ words) turns and another discussion text contained only one. In a sample of 100 turns taken from the beginnings of the four discussions, the average turn length was found to be 16.5 words in length. Thus, in these discussions, turns were generally short, and there was rapid turn-taking.
4. Sentence completion. One place in which the highly interactive nature of the discourse was very apparent was in the tendency of speakers to complete each other's utterances. There were numerous examples. In some cases one speaker supplied a word which another speaker could not seem to remember, e. g.

P: I would like recommend you if you really want to be...

C: (air hostess)

R: (air hostess)

5. Overlap and Latching. In all of the discussions there was much overlap (i.e. simultaneous speaking—as in the example above). Tannen (1990) distinguished between overlap and interruption. In the case of overlap the speaker's intention is supportive, while a speaker who interrupts is trying to gain the floor. There was also much latching—that is, one speaker continues what another one was saying without a pause just as if the same speaker were continuing to talk.
6. Other repair. When there is something wrong in what a speaker says—either in content or in the way it is said—there is a preference for the speaker to correct or repair it himself or herself. To correct others' utterances is potentially face-threatening and is normally avoided. But among the Thai English speakers there was much other-repair. For example, C said, "I want to know which flight you want to work with," and in the following turn, P offered a repair, "Which airline?" This kind of other-repair did not seem to be face-threatening which may be due to the casual nature of the interaction and to the fact that there was some degree of intimacy between the interlocutors.
7. Repetition. Repetition was very common. There were many instances of exact repetition and many more in which one speaker paraphrased another. Repetition has various functions (Tannen 1989: 47–52) and may have multiple functions in any one instance.
8. Use of questions. Questions were used to maintain a high level of involvement between speakers. Questions are useful in this way because they encourage a response from the other speaker. These features were amply exemplified in the group discussion texts and can be considered discourse features of Thai English speakers in the speech event of group discussion.

5.0 Conclusion

The starting point for our study was to compare the performance of Thai English speakers in group discussions with that of the Japanese and American English speakers in Watanabe's study. We had expected that similar cultural values might result in the Thai English speakers exhibiting similar discourse features with the Japanese speakers, but this was not always the case.

As for managing the discussion, the Thai English speakers did not open or close their discussions in the deliberate way that the Japanese did. Unlike the Japanese speakers they did not give detailed reasons nor did they present their reasons in the frame of a story. The Thai English speakers initially gave very brief reasons and elaborated on them only when prompted to do so by the other speakers. In the presenting reasons and in developing a stance the Japanese speakers in Watanabe's study used a "multiple-accounts" argumentation strategy which involved discussing the topic from different points of view to demonstrate that the speaker was aware of these points and had taken them into account. The Thai English speakers did not use this strategy.

The differences between our findings for Thai English speakers and Watanabe's for Japanese speakers prompted us to reconsider Watanabe's explanation for her results. She explained the differences she found as cultural differences resulting from different cultural values and different understandings, or frames, of the speech event of group discussion. That is certainly a plausible explanation, but comparing our findings with hers reminded us of another important factor: the level of intimacy between the participants. All of Watanabe's subjects were students, but they were not necessarily in the same class and may not have been acquainted with one another. Among her Japanese subjects there were age differences that influenced the order in which they spoke. In contrast, in our groups the subjects were all students in the same class, and were either 21 or 22 years old (with one exception). Some of them had been acquainted for three years and had taken several classes together. There was, therefore, some familiarity and intimacy among them. This intimacy surely influenced their way of talking to one another. Subjects who were less well-acquainted might have been more careful and deliberate about organizing and carrying out their discussion.

On the other hand, the "group orientation" which Watanabe described was in evidence in the way that the Thai English speakers cooperatively constructed their discourse and it significantly influenced the pattern of discourse. In the Thai English discussion groups there was short, rapid turn-taking. There was also much overlapping, latching and cooperative sentence completion. Listeners cooperated by offering sentence completions, by encouraging speakers to elaborate on what they had said, and by offering repairs and through verbal and non-verbal backchannel. Overall, the Thai English speakers could be said to exhibit a high-involvement style in the group discussion speech event.

This study has identified some discourse features of the language used by Thai English speakers in the speech event of group discussion. At the same time it raises questions for further research.

Among these are the following: How much do the discourse features observed here reflect cultural or linguistic influence from Thai? How much do the Thai English speakers' discourse style and strategies contrast with those of English L1 speakers in group discussion? Our analysis focused on the similarities and differences with the Japanese speakers in Watanabe's study, but it would be useful to make a more in-depth comparison with speakers from other language backgrounds doing group discussion in English and in their first language. Further research in this area could provide a better basis for the development of pedagogical materials to train students to participate in group discussions effectively.

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