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Turn Taking Patterns of Average Achievers in an Oral Interaction Test

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the turn taking patterns of final year undergraduate students who are average achievers in an oral interaction test. The scope of this study focuses on profiling the students' oral interactive ability in terms of their turn taking patterns in a small group discussion. In order to examine this, the oral test of 14 group discussion tasks in the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Test of English Communication Skills (UTMTECS) for graduating students were video recorded after consent was sought from the students before the recording took place. The recordings were then transcribed for analysis using an adapted version of Allwright (1988) model of turn taking patterns. From the transcribed files, it is observed that the average achievers mostly gave turns through 'Neither' turn giving pattern and gained turns through 'Take' turn getting pattern. From the findings, the average achievers in UTMTECS oral test are profiled as moderate speakers of English language. Nevertheless, they are still able to interact with other candidates in the group discussion with functional level of communication skills. This study also provides more insights into the setting of a benchmark to evaluate graduating students' oral English communication competency and preparedness for the workplace.

Keywords: Turn Taking Patterns, UTMTECS, moderate speakers, oral English communication

1.0 INTRODUCTION

English language is now a lingua franca with increasing number of speakers every day. It has become the dominant language in today's world. It is essential for people to speak and converse well in English if they are to enter the global workforce. As mentioned in Graduate Business Students' Preferences for the Managerial Communication Course Curriculum, effective english communication skills are indispensable workplace tools for success in business. It is an important skill to master as it correlates highly with employment success, offering important career benefits. Huckin and Olsen (1991), Lan *et al.* (2011) and Ping and Weiping (2004) also confirmed that good communication

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skills aid in job searches and in promotion to leadership and managerial positions in the workplace. Thus, effective oral communication skills are regarded as one of the most important criteria that employers sought for in job applicants (Crosling & Ward, 2002).

However, the standard of English in Malaysia has deteriorated over the past few decades. The Graduates Employability Blueprint 2012-2017 reported that prospective employers complain that fresh graduates from Institution of Higher Learning (IHL) are lacking the prerequisite attributes in job application. According to Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2012), more than 50% of the fresh graduates are regarded to be unsatisfactory in English communication skills, resulting in the rising issue of concern over the marketability of the graduates. A survey carried out to investigate employers' expectations of language at the workplace revealed that our graduates lack speaking and writing skills and most of them doubt their own ability in using English efficiently in their everyday work (Singh *et al.*, 2011).

As a result, undergraduate students enrolled in Malaysian public universities are required to take English communication course as one of their university courses in order to graduate. The question arises when there is no one uniform or standardised test to evaluate graduating students' level of English communication proficiency across the public universities in Malaysia. And also, there is no proper yardstick for the industry to gauge fresh graduates' communicative ability across the country (Abdul Raof, 2011).

In the White Paper on Proficiency in Enterprise Communication 2011, the work industry calls for a uniform and standardised English communication test that can serve as the yardstick to measure the communication competency of university fresh graduates who are non-native speakers of English for employment purposes (Zubairi, 2011). In light of this, the Test of English Communication Skills (UTMTECS) is introduced and made compulsory to final year undergraduate students by Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) (UTM Wajibkan Ujian Khas BI, 2011). Their communication achievement will then be recorded on their academic transcript.

With a valid and reliable band indicating graduating students' level of English communication competency in UTMTECS, employers are better able to choose the right applicants who best suit the job position in terms of the language competency required. In light of this, the band achieved by the graduating students in UTMTECS should truly reflect their ability in oral communication skills. With clear indication from UTMTECS result, the arduous task of selecting the best recruit for the job is made easier. Employers will have a better view of their prospective employees' communication competency when evaluating and selecting the right candidates who best fit the job requirement. The purpose of this research was to identify and describe the ability of graduating students' oral communication ability based on their oral performance in UTMTECS. To be specific, the focus is on the interactive ability in terms of turn taking patterns in small group discussion among the graduating students who have achieved a Level 3 in UTMTECS oral. This is because Level 3 in UTMTECS oral assessment is the functional level in oral communicative competency as determined by the industry. Level 3 achievers in UTMTECS oral assessment are considered as moderate users of spoken English language.

The speech sample of this research came from final year undergraduate students who sat for oral UTMTECS. The findings from this research represent the oral communication competency in terms of interactive ability for the entire population of final year undergraduate students who sat for

UTMTECS. The findings of this research will contribute to the precision of UTMTECS as a standardised test for oral communication skills. The descriptions on graduating students' ability to interact with other speakers and to contribute ideas effectively in the speaking task assigned in oral UTMTECS will be able to reflect the communication competency of the fresh graduates in the workplace setting. The finding of this research could be used as the baseline data of turn taking strategies in group discussions of final year students.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review presents the oral communication competency of non-native speakers of English, conversation analysis, definition of turn and past studies involving turn taking.

2.1 Oral Communicative Competency

Oral communication is the effective interpretation, composition, and presentation of information, ideas, and values to other interlocutors in a communicative setting. The speakers are not only required to convey their message clearly and comprehensibly, but also required to follow the appropriate convention based on the different functions. In the earlier stage of applied and general linguistic study, Chomsky proposed that communicative competency is equivalent to linguistic competency. However, this notion was soon taken over by Hymes (1972), defining communicative competency as not only restricted to linguistic competence, but also bringing in the sociolinguistic aspect into Chomsky's view on linguistic competence.

Later on, Winddowson (1983) stated the difference between competence and capacity in the study of English language proficiency. Communicative competence is highly associated with linguistic and sociolinguistic conventions whereas capacity is defined as the ability to communicate. Communicative competence is understood as the capability to use knowledge as the channel to express ideas using language. Having defined communicative competence in this way, he highlighted on the performance or real language use on the relationship between competence and performance.

The underpinning theories in assessing oral communication competence have evolved over the past few decades. There are several communicative competence models proposed by the researchers and academics over the decades (Canale & Swain, 1981; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Council of Europe, 2001). Canale and Swain's academics communicative competence model took the concept of communicative competence as their central element in forming a framework for language ability. Their claimed that communicative competence is a combination of the fundamental system of knowledge and skill needed to communicate effectively (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980). In their concept of communicative competence, knowledge refers to the conscious or unconscious knowledge of an individual about language and about other aspects of language use and skill is distinctive from one's language capacity but more on how it is manifested in a real communication. This model proposed by Canale and Swain belief that communicative competence is a vast domain and complex in nature that 'even native speakers may not achieve it' (Canale, 1981).

On the other hand, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, or CEFR, serves as a guideline used in describing the achievements of foreign languages users across Europe. This model has been adapted for a standardised grading for learners' language proficiency. In the CEFR, communicative competence includes three basic components namely, language competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence (Council of Europe, 2001).

2.2 Turn and Turn Taking

Heller (1988) points out that the participants in discussions should be able to identify places where the next speaker may come in whether nominated or not and learning ways of nominating the next speaker, and learning some important formula for interruption or conversational tools. Kumaravadivelu (1993) also pointed out that ESL/ EFL students should be initiated to ask for information, ask for clarification, and reflect their agreements or disagreements with their fellow students and teachers. Among other researchers who have explored speakers' turn taking patterns in communication are namely Taddese (1997), Girma (1999), and Yohannes (2008). The first three studies were about turn taking while the forth study was about turn taking in relation to code switching.

A turn is often simply referred to a person who is holding the floor at the time of speaking. Van Lier indicated that a turn occurs whenever one person speaks, for as long as he or she speaks and until another person speaks. However, problem arises due to the spontaneous feature of conversation (Nunan, 1985). In an on-going conversation, it may be difficult to identify a turn when other interlocutors interrupt to speak.

Besides, Van Lier (1988) and Nunan (1985) may encounter false starts, half-finished or cut-off turns, and so on in which the borderlines are likely to be blurred and make it difficult to separate or demarcate the turns. Goodwin (1977) derives that turn cannot be described accurately as a static unit structure with fixed boundaries but rather be conceptualized as a time bound process. Therefore, it is the matter of time in determining the structure of a turn.

It should be borne in mind that in this study listening responses or back-channels that occur during a current turn are not regarded as turns; they are rather considered as turn lubricators (Yngve, 1970; Duncan, 1972; Orestrom, 1983). All restarts are also considered as separate turns.

To further study the turn taking patterns, Sacks *et al*. (1974) proposed a model to depict how speakers manage to get and give turns taking in an everyday conversation. As Van Lier (1988) says, in general conversation turn taking is governed by 'competition' and 'initiative'. Hatch stated that "Conversations are supposed to by symmetrical, that is each party should receive a fair share of turns at talk" (Hatch, 1992). Besides, there are three fundamental facts on conversation as proposed by Sacks *et al*. (1974). Firstly, turn taking occurs; secondly, one speaker tends to talk at a time and finally, turns are taken with as little gap or overlap between them as possible (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2002).

The model discussed above leads to Hutchby and Wooffitt 'Turn construction' and 'turn distribution'. Turn construction refers to two key features: I) Turn constructions have the property of 'project-ability'. In this regard, the participants may wish to project in line of a turn construction

component and what sort of unit is to be projected as well as at what point is likely to end. II) Turn construction components come to serve as 'transition-relevance places' at their boundaries. With similar instances, at the end of each unit there is the possibility for justifiable transition between speakers (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2002).

Dudley-Evans and John (1998) suggested three major skills in taking turns. One of the key skills in recognizing when the speaker is giving signals that she/he is ready to finish the turn and relinquish the floor to another speaker. The second skill is to gain entry at the end of the turn. The third skill includes the technique of handling the turn effectively in deciding how long is appropriate as well as keeping the conversation uninterrupted.

Acccoding to Cunningsworth (1995), if the students develop the above skills of turn taking, during their small group discussion, it might be possible to say that they have a great deal of opportunities to make use of the target language and thus a competent user of the target language.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The objective of the present study is to investigate the patterns of turn taking in small group discussion among final year undergraduate students in an oral assessment. This section provides an overview of the data collection and data analysis process.

3.1 Research Participant, and Procedure

There are 54 candidates from 14 groups of students who participated and contributed to the qualitative data for the research. Based on the result of the oral UTMTECS, 33 candidates scored Level 3 in the oral test. The sample population for this research was final year undergraduate students who sat for UTMTECS oral assessment in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), Johor Bahru campus. Since UTMTECS is compulsory for all graduating degree students, the different group of candidates selected were from different faculties. However, it is important to note that the four participants assigned to any one group were from the same faculty. Thus, the participants share similar knowledge background and four years of studying in UTM. The small age gap among the final year graduating students of about one to two years and the gender difference are not the focus of the study, thus not taken into account in this research.

However, due to the purpose of this research, purposive sampling method was employed in this research. Only data from candidates who achieved a band score of Level 3 in oral UTMTECS were taken for further analysis. In this study, fourteen groups of UTMTECS oral test group discussion were recorded and transcribed. Among the fourteen groups, 33 of the graduating students are Level 3 achievers in UTMTECS oral test who are regarded as the moderate speakers of English. In UTMTECS assessment, Level 3 is of the functional level in oral communicative competency. Level 3 achievers in oral UTMTECS are considered as moderate users of spoken English language. This sampling method is solely abide by the objectives of this research which is to profile in some detail the oral communicative ability of UTM graduating students, specifically on their accounts of turn taking patterns and language used within a fifteen-minute face-to-face oral group discussion task.

The proposed research design is of qualitative. There were three important stages in conducting this research as shown in Figure 1 below.
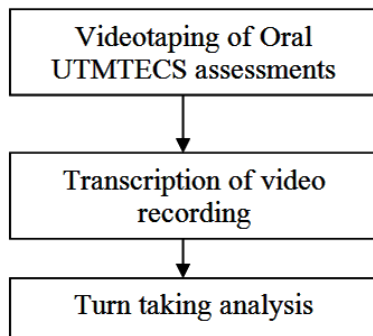

Figure 1 Flow chart of data collection and analysis

The first stage of the research involved videotaping of actual student performance in UTMTECS oral assessment. Two video cameras were set up in the examination room to video record the group discussion. Only the groups which had volunteered to take part in this research were video recorded. The names and details of the candidates were private and confidential, thus, their identity remained anonymous and replaced with specific codes.

The second stage of this research involved the transcription of the video recordings. The fifteen-minute group discussions were transcribed verbatim. The turn taking patterns used in turn giving and turn getting were later analysed.

3.2 Procedure of Data Analyses

This research adopted and adapted the turn taking model proposed by Allwright (1988). The proposed turn taking model categorized the turn taking into two categories, namely turn giving and turn getting. Allwright's model of turn taking patterns was slightly modified by Taddese before the model was applied to his research (Tadesse Habte, 1997; Allwright, 1988).

In this research, the objective was to find out the students' level of participation through turn taking patterns in small group discussions. The analysis was done using the modified turn taking model based on the model proposed by Allwright (1980) and Taddese (1997). The proposed model of turn taking patterns in this research consists of a three-item turn giving category and a seven-item turn getting category. The definition of each item in turn giving category is as shown in Table 1. That of turn getting items is as shown in Table 2.

Table 1 Definition of the turn giving items as proposed in the study

Neither, Ø	Make a turn available without making either a personal or a general solicit (e.g. by simply concluding one's utterance with appropriate terminal makers).
Personal Solicit, P	Make a personal solicit (i.e. nominate the next speaker).
General Solicit, G	Make a general solicit. Open the floor of discussion to all the candidates.

Table 2 Definition of the turn getting items as proposed in the study

Accept	Respond to a personal solicit (This includes (a) a turn that are made available after interruptions which are not intended to gain the floor, (b) when one of the interlocutors poses question(s) to a person who has been speaking before him/ her and (c) those that are already made personal through gesture).
Steal	Respond to a specific solicit made to another person (which involves the intended person to miss a turn).
Volunteer	Respond to a general solicit when the floor of discussion is opened to all.
Take	Take an unsolicited turn when a turn is available to express one's ideas or views.
Make	Make an unsolicited turn, during the current speaker's turn, without intent to gain the floor (e.g. making remarks and comments that indicate one is paying attention).
Interrupt	Start or attempt to start a turn when the current speaker is speaking with intent to gain the floor (which usually signals a change of topic or ideas).
Miss	Fail to respond to a specific solicit.

This research also investigates a possible relationship between the turn giving and turn getting categories in a small group discussion. The relationship between the items in the proposed model of turn taking patterns adopted from Allwright and Taddese is shown in Figure 2 (Tadesse Habte, 1997; Allwright, 1988).

From Figure 2, the turn giving items are boxed with dotted line and the turn getting items are boxed with dashed line. As shown in Figure 2, the types of turn giving items determine the types of turn getting patterns. The proposed model of turn taking patterns helps identify the turn giving and turn getting patterns in a group discussion precisely. The model assumed that the turn taking pattern starts with a speaker who then gives the turn to others. The turn getting in the turn taking pattern depends on the turn giving patterns used by the current speaker to end his discourse. For a detail explanation and example of this model used to study the turn taking pattern applied by speakers in oral communication was refer Tang (2016). By using the proposed standardised flow of turn taking pattern shown in Figure 2, a more precise evaluation method to analyse the turn taking patterns in the oral UTMTECS was achieved.
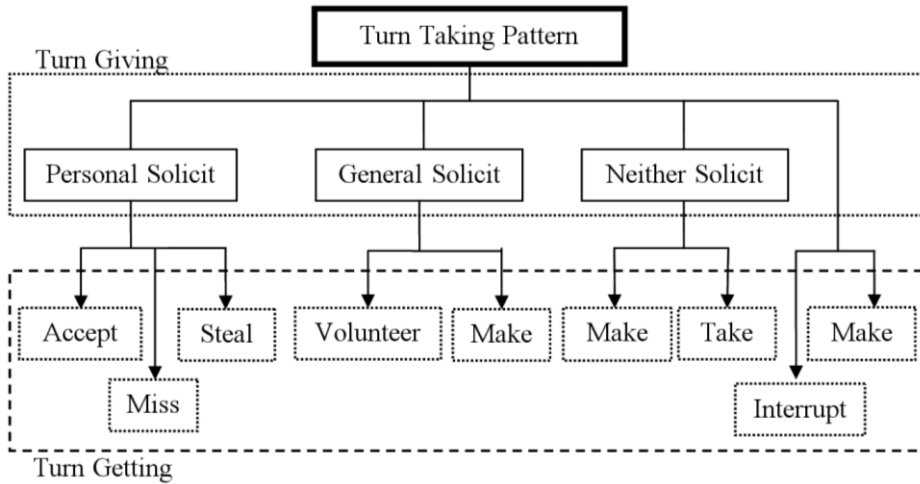
Figure 2 Proposed model of turn taking patterns and the relationship between turn giving items and turn getting items

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The turn taking pattern applied by all the Level 3 candidates in the oral test is shown in the Table 3 in total number of the turn pattern found also in Figure 3(a) and Figure 3(b) in percentage of the turn pattern found.

Table 3 Total number of each turn giving pattern made by all Level 3 oral UTMTECS achievers found in the discussion

Candidate	Total
Take	104
Accept	33
Interrupt	5
Make	44
Volunteer	7
Miss	2
Steal	2
Total	197
Neither	108
Personal Solicit through eye contact	5
Personal Solicit through verbally	32
/G/	8
Total	153

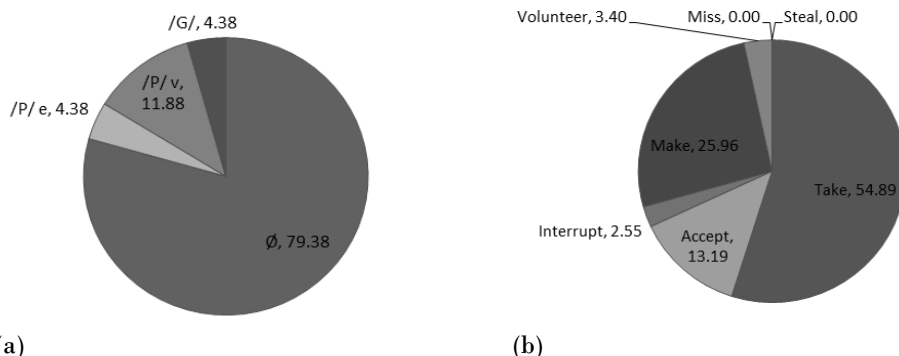(a)   (b)

Figure 3 (a) Percentage of each turn giving pattern made by all Level 3 oral UTMTECS achievers found in the discussion. (b) Percentage of each turn getting pattern obtained by all the Level 3 oral UTMTECS achievers found in the discussion

From the analysis, it was found that the candidates of the oral UTMTECS, especially those who scored Level 3 and deemed to be the average achievers in UTMTECS, mostly preferred to make the 'Neither' turn giving pattern when giving the turn to other candidates in the group. The 'Neither' turn giving pattern means that the candidate makes a turn available by simply concluding one's utterance with appropriate terminal makers. In this pattern, the speakers just stopped speaking and then passively waited for another candidate to get the turn himself. As shown in Figure 3(a), there are 80% of the turn giving made by the Level 3 oral UTMTECS achievers are 'Neither' turn giving pattern. From the transcription files, it is found that the average achievers have limitation of word choices during the oral test. This observation is a supporting reason to justify why the students prefer to make 'Neither' turn giving pattern. This is because in this turn giving pattern, the students just need to simply conclude their utterance without inviting other candidates in the group to maintain the discussion.

In contrast, the 'General Solicit' turn giving pattern was the least common pattern made by the Level 3 achievers due to the limitation of word choice. Only 4 % of the turn giving was made using this pattern by the Level 3 achievers. This turn giving pattern required the Level 3 achievers to open the turn to all the candidates in the group and invite any of them to speak. A similar observation is also obtained from the 'Personal Solicit' turn giving pattern. The percentage of this pattern made in the discussion by all the average achievers is 16% where 12 % is 'Personal Solicit' turn giving verbally and 4% through eye contact. From the common words and phrases evaluated from the transcription file, it is found that the average achievers are only able to use limited words and phrases to make the 'Personal Solicit' turn giving pattern or 'General Solicit' turn giving pattern (Tang, 2016). The common words and phrases identified from the group discussion do not have much variation. Similar observation is also shown in turn giving pattern where the 'Neither' turn giving pattern are the majority pattern found in the discussion (Tang, 2016).

Since the 'Neither' turn giving pattern were the most common turn giving pattern made by the candidates in the discussion, a large amount of 'Take' turn getting pattern happened in the oral test. From the analysis, around 55 % of the turn getting pattern obtained by the Level 3 achievers were

the 'Take' turn getting pattern. This means that the Level 3 or the average achievers are active speakers in the discussion and able to take an unsolicited turn to speak when it is available. Besides, 'Make' turn getting pattern is also commonly used by the average achievers to get the turn in oral UTMTECS with 26% of the total turn getting pattern obtained by average achievers. The 'Make' turn getting pattern means the speaker would like to take the turn but they do not intent to gain the floor. In addition, 'Accept' turn getting pattern is a portion in the total number of turn getting obtained by the average achievers with 13%. Other types of turn getting patterns used by the achievers in the oral test are below 10% in total.

Based on the evaluation of the common words used by the average achievers to get the turn, different common words used by the achievers to get the turn in different conditions are found although the words and phrases used in the similar situation has not much variation. So, this identifies that the limitation of word choices among the average achievers in oral UTMTECS does not cause any issue to the achievers on getting the turn to speak in the group discussion (Tang, 2016).

5.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings through transcriptions were used to profile the turn taking patterns used by oral UTMTECS average achievers in the small group discussion. The average achievers preferred to use 'Neither' turn giving pattern and, the 'Take' turn getting pattern are the most common turn getting pattern used in the oral interaction test. From the observation, the average achievers portrayed limited usage of vocabulary due to their language proficiency. The 'Neither' turn giving pattern shows that the candidates make a turn available by simply concluding one's utterance with appropriate terminal makers. In this pattern, the achievers just finished speaking their ideas and then passively waited for another candidate to get the turn himself. Therefore, most of the turn giving patterns identified in the oral test is 'Neither' turn giving pattern. This is because the achievers did not open the floor of discussion through 'General Solicit' nor invite the next speaker through 'Personal Solicit', but merely end their turns with 'Neither' turn giving pattern.

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