The Influence of Gender in Dyad Communication

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ABSTRACT
Although many studies have examined the effect of gender pairing in communicative activities among English learners, mixed results have been observed. This study sought to examine qualitative differences among Japanese students in both same-gender and mixed-gender dyads. Though the sample size was relatively small, patterns observed were that negotiation of meaning and listener/speaker communicative assistance differed between male-male dyads and female-female dyads. However, individual personality played a perhaps stronger role in influencing communicative style regardless of gender pairing.

INTRODUCTION
In recent years, there has been considerable interest among linguists and social psychologists as to whether and to what extent gender influences both the style and amount of communicative utterances in written and oral interactions among English learners. Although some studies have shown that gender has very little significant impact in written communication (Fox et al, 2007), mixed results have been obtained regarding face-to-face interactions. In his 1989 study, Mulac found that males tend to speak more than females in mixed gender dyads, whereas men and women both shared speaking time more equally in same-gender dyads. In addition, Mulac observed that men's mean length of utterance was almost a third longer than women's regardless of dyad pairing. However, in a series of studies, Thomson, Murachver, and Green found much less pronounced variation (2001). Instead, they emphasized that "each person is capable of using a range of styles depending on whom he or she is talking to", and that, over time, partners' speech behavior tends to converge. Moreover, this convergence is accentuated among mixed-gender dyads. Thomson et al argued that a more effective predictor of differential speech patterns was the amount of facilitation a partner gave or received (e.g. asking questions, proposing topics). However, since "women are more likely than men to function as facilitators in conversation" (Thomson et al, 2001), the relative importance of gender pairing should be apparent, although Thomson et al emphasized that individual personality plays a more significant role.

To our knowledge, there has not been extensive academic study of the role of gender in student pairing among native Japanese-speaking English learners. We were primarily curious as to whether and to what extent gender played a role in communication between such students, and whether it was consistent with findings among native English speakers. This interest resulted from two practices of classes in the EDC program: firstly, since classes are quite small, an unequal gender balance is likely to have a larger impact on class dynamics than would be the case in standard size classes, and secondly, because student pairing is regularly changed many times in each class, the natural convergence of speech patterns and behavior observed by Thomson et al would be less likely to emerge.

METHODOLOGY
Unfortunately, because our sample sizes and opportunity for observation were limited, we decided that extensive statistical studies on the scale generally found in similar studies would be impossible. Instead, we chose to examine closely and present examples of student utterances in a variety of same-gender and mixed-gender dyads in hope that patterns of gender-based differential communicative styles either would or would not emerge, and that, through this
examination, concrete recommendations could be made in order to help teachers facilitate a more balanced interaction among students regardless of pairing.

The participants in this study all belonged to Levels 2 or 3 of the English Discussion Course. From each the classes selected, four consistently participative students (two male and two female) were chosen. Care was made that participating students had similar levels of proficiency in English. The participants were paired by same and mixed gender, and tasked to discuss for 6 minutes at a time the following topic questions:

- **Same Gender Pair:** What types of pressure are the most serious for university students?
- **Mixed Gender Pair:** Are you independent?

The purpose of having two different topics was so that the participants would discuss a new topic with the second partner without repeating ideas. The recordings were done during Week 9 when students only received grades for attendance and quiz prior to the Discussion Test so that, during recording, the participants could be separated from the rest of the class.

### RESULTS
#### Same-Sex Dyads
When speaking in same-sex dyads, our observations were that female participants tended to be more forthcoming, or to volunteer more information. This seemed to lessen the need for follow-up questions, as most of the obvious information students might ask each other about was already covered. And, indeed, female students, when paired together, did ask fewer follow-up questions than participants in same-sex male dyads or mixed gender dyads.

As listeners, participants in same-sex female dyads seemed to help the speaker when struggling to express an idea, whether by finishing a sentence or anticipating a word.

*Extract 1:*
Speaker: …because Rikkyo is private school, so it’s not cheap, so… so my parents pay the…pay the…pays moneys for…for…for my…my…

Listener: Fees?

Speaker: Yes, yes, fees. Thank you.

*Extract 2:*
Speaker: I think I want to have a friend of course but I think many friends is not so important. A few friends…uh…uh…friends who…uh…un

Listener: …few friends that you can share…

Speaker:…yes, share…share feelings or…Such friends is…ne.. necessity?

Listener: …yes, important…necessary.

*Extract 3:*
Speaker: I agree with your idea but making so many friends is good because…uh…having many friends is…uh… connect …connecting…uh…future. Uh…yes. I think having few… good…great friends…best…

Listener: Having few best friends…yes?
Having few...yes, best friends...is important.

Extract 4:
Speaker: My pressure is not having...I have...I don’t have many clothes...so...I...un...every morning I am pressure...un...
Listener:...pressure to wake up early...Yes, me, too.

Finally, consistent with Thompson, Murachver, and Green's study (2001), we found that female students in same-sex dyads very often and appropriately used discussion facilitating phrases, most frequently among them:
- Can I start?
- How about you?
- Can I ask a question?
- Can I make a comment?

Among male same-sex dyads, we observed that turns tended to be longer, although this varied with personality. We also found that some of these students tended not to ask as many follow-up questions, including some missed opportunities to ask for more information, instead adding their own opinion or changing topics.

As listeners, in contrast to participants in female-female dyads, the male-male dyad participants were less likely to anticipate words or volunteer vocabulary for the speaker. Instead, these students often either gave standard reactions or repeated the last phrase, presumably to show the speaker that he understands his partner.

Extract 5:
Speaker: I’m pressure...eh...come to school...eh...homework too. My home is Chiba...there is...eh...take one hour...by train, so...but I have to change train so I can’t sleep. If I sleep...un...then it’s finish. Homework is so...I want to enjoy my campus life so homework is...make me...enjoy...uh...eh...
Listener: I see.

Extract 6:
Speaker: I pressure...my parents...parents...my parents want to say...wants me to get...nandake...part job.
Listener: Part job. I see.

Extract 7:
Listener: For example? What pressure?
Speaker: For example, cram school...cram school and...cram school’s tutor teacher...and parents. And friends...who is university students...uh...yes.
Listener: Aaaah, I see, I see...Okay.
Mixed-Sex Dyads
The influence of individual personality was clearest in mixed-gender dyads. Because of this, it was difficult for us to make generalizations, as the patterns were much less clear. In general, we found that negotiation of meaning tended to be limited to reactions such as "I see", "uh huh", and "hmm". We observed much less of the anticipation and vocabulary help that was common among female-female dyad participants.

However, regarding length of turns or follow-up questions, we found that the more confident speakers tended to speak longer or ask more questions regardless of gender. In addition, we did not observe any qualitative difference in the follow-up questions asked. Some typical questions asked were:

- Do you feel pressure to go out with friends?
- What part-time job you want?
- Do you cook?
- What subject do you teach [in cram school]?

There seemed to be, as stated above, little discernable correlation between gender and frequency as well as type of questions asked by the listener.

The Importance of Student Rapport
Perhaps the most difficult aspect of student interaction to assess is the rapport between students. This aspect is perhaps impossible to quantify, or even to adequately describe, but it is an aspect that all attentive teachers have an intuitive sense for. We observed that the ease or friendship apparently felt between students dramatically affected student performance in dyads, whether same-gender or mixed-gender. Male students, especially when paired with another male student, tended to joke or make less-serious remarks when there seemed a relaxed or friendly relationship between speaking partners.

In addition, we found that, when there seemed to be a more relaxed relationship between partners, the speaker tended to ask the listener for help when struggling to express an idea regardless of gender or pairing.

CONCLUSION
Because of the small number of student participants in our study, and thus the necessarily subjective and qualitative nature of our observations, our conclusions should perhaps be regarded with a degree of caution. That said, because we did in fact observe patterns of differential communicative styles consistent among multiple classes, some general inferences can be made.

In our observations, the clearest gender-related communicative difference occurred with negotiation of meaning styles between female-female dyads and male-male dyads. Because of this, it might be helpful to rotate students frequently between same-gender and mixed-gender groupings when possible. However, since many classes have an unequal balance of male and female students, teachers with classes composed mostly or entirely of male students may want to emphasize and practice more explicit ways for listeners to help speakers express difficult ideas, as well as ways for speakers to ask listeners for assistance.

However, because student rapport played such an important role in facilitating communication regardless of the gender of student pairing, it would seem perhaps more important that teachers do what they can to create an environment in which students can establish friendly relationships.
REFERENCES