Organization of Topics in Intercultural and Intracultural Small Talk

ORGANISATION DES SUJETS DANS LA PETITE DISCUSSION D'INTERCULTURELLE ET INTRACULTURELLE

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Abstract

This research investigates the extent to which addressees' cultural backgrounds affect the way Taiwanese university students organize topics while engaged in intercultural and intracultural small talk. The participants were 16 Taiwanese university students majoring in English. The participants were asked to take part in two role-plays in English: one with an exchange student from the Philippines and another with a local Taiwanese student. Each role-play lasted for five minutes and the role-plays were audio-recorded for analysis. Following the role-plays, the participants were asked to write a reflection report expressing their thoughts about interacting with the exchange student and the local student. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted to obtain further insights into the reason why the students introduced certain topics during the role-plays. The findings indicate that the participants were noticeably more curious and also sensitive regarding politeness when the addressee was the exchange student, but less so with the local Taiwanese student; these differences led the participants to organize their topics differently during the small talk role-plays. Despite the fact that English was the language used for all of the role-plays, the participants consistently introduced topics related to each other's culture when they interacted with the exchange student, while topics concerning part-time jobs, plans for holidays and plans after graduation were most frequently introduced in the role-play with the local Taiwanese student. These findings suggest that Taiwanese university students introduce different types of topics in intercultural and intracultural small talk, and that the addressees' cultural backgrounds play a significant role for the Taiwanese students in organizing their topics during small talk.

Key words: Intercultural communication; Intracultural communication; Small talk

Résumé

Cette étude examine la mesure dans laquelle les destinataires horizons culturelles affectent la façon dont les étudiants universitaires taiwanais organisent tout les sujets engagés dans le petit entretien interculturel et intraculturel. Les participants étaient 16 étudiants universitaires taïwanais spécialisé en anglais. Les participants ont été invités à prendre part à deux des jeux de rôle en anglais: l'une avec un échange d'étudiants en provenance des Philippines et une autre avec un étudiant local taïwanais. Chaque jeu de rôle a duré cinq minutes et les jeux de rôles ont été enregistrées sur bande audio pour l'analyse. Après les jeux de rôles, les participants ont été invités à rédiger un rapport de réflexion exprimer leurs pensées sur l'interaction avec l'étudiant d'échange et les étudiants locaux. Entretiens semi-structurés ont également été menées afin d'obtenir de nouvelles informations sur la raison pour laquelle les étudiants introduit certains sujets au cours des jeux de rôle-. Les résultats indiquent que les participants étaient sensiblement plus curieux et aussi sensibles concernant la politesse lorsque le destinataire a été l'étudiant d'échange, mais moins avec les étudiants locaux taïwanais, ces différences ont amené les participants à organiser leurs sujets différemment au cours de l'entretien de petits jeux de rôle. Malgré le fait que l'anglais était la langue utilisée pour tous les jeux de rôles, les participants ont constamment présenté des sujets liés à la culture des autres quand ils interagissaient avec l'étudiant d'échange, tandis que des sujets concernant emplois à temps partiel, des plans pour des vacances

et des plans d'après le diplôme étaient le plus souvent introduit dans le jeu de rôle avec les étudiants locaux taiwanais. Ces résultats suggèrent que les étudiants universitaires taïwanais d'introduire différents types de sujets dans le petit entretien interculturel et intraculturelle, et que les destinataires origines culturelles jouent un rôle important pour les étudiants taiwanais dans l'organisation de leurs sujets pendant le petit entretien.

Mots-clés: La communication interculturelle; La communication intraculturelle; Petit discussion

INTRODUCTION

In this era of rapid globalization, the English language has undoubtedly become the dominant language for intercultural communication. Individuals often use English in small talk during intercultural encounters. Small talk is an informal discourse that speakers engage in to build and maintain rapport. It is also referred to as chit-chat (Cheepen, 1998; Hudson, 1980), gossip (Blum-Kulka, 2000), sociable talk (Ragan, 2000), social rituals (Kuiper & Flindall, 2000), and relational talk (Koester, 2004).

This research investigates Taiwanese university students' organization of topics during the course of engaging in intercultural small talk with an exchange student from the Philippines, and in intracultural small talk with a local Taiwanese student. Intercultural communication is defined as "the symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, pp.16-17). Intracultural communication, on the other hand, refers to "the type of communication that takes place between members of the same dominant culture, but with slightly differing values" (Sitaram & Cogdell, 1976, p.28). In this study, 'intercultural small talk' is defined as small talk between members of different cultures, while 'intracultural small talk' is defined as small talk between members of the same cultural group.

Individuals may experience a greater level of emotional vulnerability in their initial encounters with people from different cultural groups than with people from the same cultural group because when people communicate with those from their own cultural group, they can rely on the habitual scripts and interaction styles to communicate (Ting-Toomey, 1999). However, such habitual scripts and styles do not operate effectively when they interact with people from different cultural groups. Therefore, it can be argued that when Taiwanese students use English as the default language in small talk with an exchange student and also with the local student, they may engage in small talk differently due to the interlocutors having different cultural backgrounds. It is hoped that a comparison between intercultural and intracultural small talk by Taiwanese university students will contribute to our understanding of how interlocutors' cultural backgrounds may influence the way Taiwanese students engage in small talk, particularly as it concerns their choice of topics.

1. CULTURAL DISTANCE BETWEEN TAIWAN AND THE PHILIPPINES

To a certain extent, Taiwan and the Philippines can be said to have similar cultures. Hall's (1976) cultural theory distinguishes a culture as belonging to high-context culture or low-context culture. High-context culture means that "most of the information is either in the physical context or initialized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" (Hall, 1976, p.79). Taiwan and the Philippines are similar in that both of them belong to the high-context culture. Low-context culture, on the other hand, means that "the mass of information is vested in the explicit code" (Hall, 1976, p.70). Many western cultures such as Australia, the U.K., and the U.S.A. belong to the low-context culture.

While Taiwan and the Philippines may be similar in comparison to the western cultures mentioned above, a close examination of both the Taiwanese and the Filipino culture through Hofstede's (1980; 1983; 1991; 2001) cultural dimensions shows that they are still quite different. Hofstede's 'cultural dimensions' is a useful theory to explain cultural values and behaviors. Hofstede conducted a large-scale survey study that investigated values of different cultures, involving 50 countries and three regions (Arab regions, West Africa and East Africa); he proposed five dimensions of culture: (1) power distance, (2) uncertainty avoidance, (3) individualism vs. collectivism, (4) masculinity vs. feminism, and (5) long-term vs. short-term orientation.

Power distance refers to the extent to which members of a culture expect an unequal distribution of power, and it was measured using what Hofstede calls the Power Distance Index (PDI). Hofstede's study shows that Taiwan's PDI score was 58, while the Philippines scored 94. This means Filipino culture places much greater emphasis on the power relations compared to the Taiwanese culture. Uncertainty avoidance refers to one's tolerance to uncertainty and ambiguity, and it was measured with Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI). Taiwan scored 69 and Philippines scored 44 in regard to their UAI, which suggests that Taiwanese are more intolerant than Filipino in terms of coping with uncertainty. Individualism and collectivism refers to the

extent to which one values individualism or collectivism, and this was measured using Individualism Index (IDV) scores. Taiwan scored 17 and Philippines scored 32 with their IDV which suggests Taiwan is slightly more collectivistic compared to the Philippines. Research on ingroup and outgroup relationships shows that members of high collectivism differentiate ingroup-outgroup more than others do (Gudykunst, Yoon, & Nishida, 1987). Since Taiwan and the Philippines are both highly collectivistic based on their low IDV, it can be said that they make such ingroup and outgroup distinction more than others do from more individualistic cultures. The masculinity and femininity dimension refers to the extent to which gender roles are distinct, and this was measured using Masculinity Index (MAS). Hofstede's data shows that Taiwan scored 45 and the Philippines scored 64 with their MAS, which suggests that the Philippines is more distinctive in terms of gender roles than Taiwan is. The last dimension, long- and short-term orientation, was added much later in Hofstede's study and it refers to the degree to which a culture is influenced by Confucius' teaching; it is measured using the Long-Term Orientation (LTO) Index. Taiwan scored 87 and the Philippines scored 19 with their LTO, which means Taiwanese culture has significantly more elements related to Confucius' teachings compared to Filipino culture.

Based on the above analysis, it can be said that although Taiwanese and the Filipino culture share similar characteristics when compared to some of the western cultures, they are still quite distinct from each other in terms of their cultural values and behaviors.

2. INTERCULTURAL VS. INTRACULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Previous research has shown that intercultural communicators perceive their communication partners to be less similar to themselves compared to their intracultural communication partners (Gudykunst, 1983; Lee & Boster, 1991). Research has also shown that intercultural communicators are less perceptive and less responsive than intracultural communicators in their initial contact (Chen, 1995, 1997). Moreover, intercultural communicators express greater uncertainty and less positive expectations in intercultural interactions compared to intracultural communications (Gudykunst & Shapiro, 1996). Greater uncertainty in intercultural encounters can lead to greater anxiety, and the greater the uncertainty, the more that the communicators feel apprehensive about communicating in intercultural encounters (Neuliep & Ryan, 1998). However, sharing topics is found to have a positive association with the perception of intercultural accommodation and interaction involvement (Chen & Cegala, 1994).

Research that compares intercultural and intracultural

encounters has shown that communicators are likely to have higher levels of self-disclosure in initial intercultural encounters than initial contact with a stranger from the same culture (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984). The greater amount of self-disclosure is due to communicators' lack of familiarity with their conversation partners; participants rarely request intimate information from their interlocutors (Lee & Boster, 1991). The self-disclosure increases in terms of its frequency and intimacy once the initial relationship has been established (Gudykunst, Nishida & Chua, 1987; Hubbert, Gudykunst & Guerrero, 1999). Intercultural couples tend to consciously self-disclose perceived differences between each other's culture to increase mutual understanding of their culture, and this allows them to match their partners' impression with their own perceived self-image (Rohrlich, 1988).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

• What topics do Taiwanese students introduce when they engage in small talk with an exchange student from the Philippines and a local student in Taiwan?

• How do Taiwanese students mentally organize their topics as they engage in small talk with an exchange student and a local student in English?

• How do they feel about engaging in small talk in English in intercultural and intracultural encounters?

3.2 Research Design

The participants of this study were 16 undergraduate Taiwanese students (13 females and 3 males) majoring in English. Their English proficiency was high intermediate. The participants were asked to take part in two role-plays in English: one with an exchange student from the Philippines and another with a local Taiwanese student. The scenario of the role-play was meeting a new student in class. The exchange student from the Philippines was sitting in an empty classroom. The participant was instructed that there was a new student in their regular English class and was asked to chat with the student for five minutes. After the five minutes, the teacher would come in and the participant had to wrap up the talk, pretending that the class was about to begin. The exact same procedure was carried out between the participants and the local Taiwanese student.

After taking part in the role-plays, the participants were asked to write a reflection report, with a minimum of two pages, regarding their interaction with the exchange student and the local Taiwanese student. In addition to the reflection report, semi-structured interviews were also conducted to obtain further insights into why the participants introduced certain topics during the role-plays and how they felt about engaging in small talk in English

with the exchange student and the local student. In order to ensure that the participants could express their thoughts freely during the interviews, all of the semi-structured interviews were carried out in Mandarin Chinese.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The participants introduced a wide range of topics during their small talk role-plays. Figure 1 shows the range of topics and the percentage of those topics introduced by the participants in their intercultural small talk with the exchange student from the Philippines. Topics that occurred only once in the data were classified as 'others.'
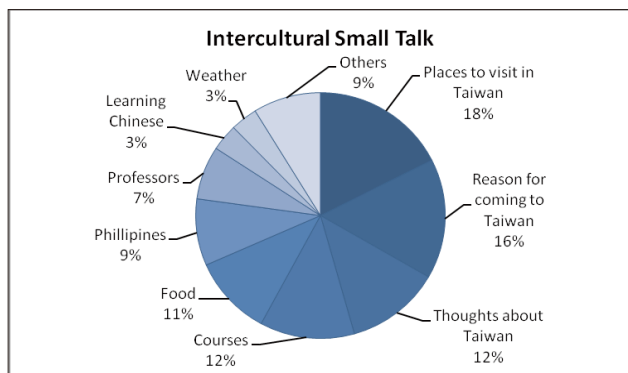

Figure 1
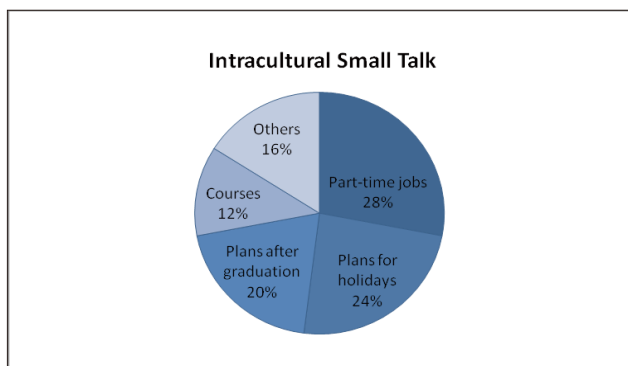**Topics Introduced in Intercultural Small Talk**

Figure 2
Topics Introduced in Intracultural Small Talk

As can be seen from Figure 1, the topics that were introduced the most often with the exchange students include: places to visit in Taiwan, the exchange student's reason for coming to Taiwan, their thoughts about Taiwan, courses they were taking and food in Taiwan and the Philippines. Figure 2 shows the range of topics and the percentage of those topics introduced by the participants during the intracultural small talk with the local Taiwanese student. Compared to the topics introduced in the intercultural small talk, the participants introduced rather different topics in their small talk with the local Taiwanese student. The participants introduced topics concerning

part-time jobs, plans for holidays and plans after the graduation the most often with the Taiwanese student.

The reflection report and the interview data show that the participants generally found their interaction with the exchange and the local student to be quite different. Emma described her interaction with the Filipino student as "cultural exchange" while she referred to her interaction with the Taiwan student as "more like the chat in a coffee shop." Emma further highlighted the difference between her interaction with the Filipino student and the Taiwanese student as follows:

> When I talked to the girl from the Philippines, I was like a tour guide because she did not know Taiwan really well. Therefore, I introduced her some traditional things in the lunar New Year and my hometown *Miaoli*, where she did not know. Also she would explain something in her hometown. However, when I talked to the Taiwanese student, we just chatted because we all knew what we talked about in Taiwan. We did not have to explain.

It is evident from Emma's reflection report that she was trying to be hospitable to the foreign student by introducing her culture as well as her hometown in Taiwan. This, however, did not happen with the local Taiwanese student since there was already common ground at the time when they started the small talk as both were locals.

The participants also expressed that they had different ways of organizing their topics during the small talk role-plays depending on whether the person they interacted with was a foreign or a local student. Xavier shared his deliberate attempt to introduce different topics to different interlocutors with different cultural backgrounds in his reflection report.

> With the foreign student, I talked about food and commute and she shared what is different regarding these two aspects in her country. For the talk with the Taiwanese student, because she is native to Taiwan, there is nothing to compare between countries. So I told her about some of the unique aspects on campus, including the food, commute and courses.

The following two extracts show Xavier's opening gambits with the Filipino student (FS) and the Taiwanese student (TS).

Extract 1 [Xavier and the Filipino student (FS)]
01   **Xavier:** hi
02   **FS:** hello
03   **Xavier:** where're you from↑
04   **FS:** from the Philippines
05   **Xavier:** you're from the Philippines↑
06   **FS:** yes↑
07   **Xavier:** how long have you been here↑
08   **FS:** here↑ um since September 8th I guess
09   **Xavier:** September 8th (.) so less than three months
10   **FS:** yeah less than three months
11   **Xavier:** how do you like it here in Taiwan↑
12   **FS:** it's ok (.) it's cool
13   **Xavier:** it's cool↑ you mean the weather or↑
14   **FS:** yeah (.) because in the Philippines we don't

have winter
15   **Xavier:** oh (.) so it's summer all year around
16   **FS:** summer and rainy season
17   **Xavier:** oh (.) so that's how you classify different
              weathers
18   **FS:** yeah

Extract 2 [Xavier and the Taiwanese student (TS)]
01   **Xavier:** hi (.) so you're new to school↑
02   **TS:** yeah
03   **Xavier:** ok (.) let me tell you one thing (.) the
              one thing you need to know about our
              school is the traffic jam kills people
04   **TS:** (laughs) really↑
05   **Xavier:** yes
06   **TS:** you commute to here↑
07   **Xavier:** yes I travel by bus (.) you can stuck
              in the traffic jam for 30 minutes within
              two stops (.) it's crazy
08   **TS:** is an accident happen↑
09   **Xavier:** I don't know

As Ting-Toomey (1999) argues, the scripts to interact with in-group and inter-group interactions differ, and this is evident through the comparison of Extracts 1 and 2. Xavier's script to interact with the local Taiwanese student does not operate in the same way in his intercultural encounter with the Filipino student.

The participants in general expressed strong curiosity to the Filipino exchange student compared to the local Taiwanese student. This was evident in some of the topics the participants introduced when they interacted with the Filipino student, such as their reason for choosing Taiwan over other places. Extract 3 shows an example of Ella asking the Filipino student why she chose to come to Taiwan as an exchange student.

Extract 3 [Ella and the Filipino student (FS)]
01   **Ella:** so you're from↑
02   **FS:** Philippines
03   **Ella:** Philippines (,) ok (.) so what you're an
              exchange student for how long↑
04   **FS:** one semester
05   **Ella:** just one semester
06   **FS:** yes
07   **Ella:** so is it really popular doing this in your
              school↑
08   **FS:** in our school yes(.), like others went to
              Europe(.) different continents around the
              world to study for one semester
09   **Ella:** uh huh
10   **FS:** yeah
11   **Ella:** and why you pick Taiwan↑
12   **FS:** because I think it's really convenient and
              because it's near our country (.) and then it's
              near yet it has really different culture
              compared to our culture so I think it's perfect
Ella mentioned in the post-event interview that while there

must be other choices as to where the Filipino students could have gone as an exchange student, she was very curious about why the Filipino student chose Taiwan over different countries, such as mainland China.

In addition to the participants' curiosity about the reason why the exchange student chose to come to Taiwan, many of the participants were curious about the exchange student's thoughts about Taiwan. The following extract shows an example of Rachel asking the Filipino student about her thoughts on Taiwan.

Extract 4 [Rachel and the Filipino student (FS)]
01   **Rachel:** so what do you think about Taiwan↑
02   **FS:** Taiwan↑ um actually I'm enjoying my stay
              here in Taiwan (.) I like the food and people
              here are friendly
03   **Rachel:** oh
04   **FS:** have you been to the Philippines↑ or
05   **Rachel:** no, but in our department, there's a
              professor (.) she is a Philippines

Rachel, in the post-event interview, mentioned that she was curious about the place she lives from the perspective of a foreigner. She said, "I'm always curious about what foreigners think of Taiwan." Rachel responded in the interview that her curiosity made her organize topics differently whether she was interacting with the exchange student or the local student.

As mentioned earlier, compared to the topics introduced by the participants while interacting with the Filipino student, the participants frequently introduced topics concerning holidays and plan after graduation. Consider Extract 5.

Extract 5 [Tina and the Taiwanese student (TS)]
01   **Tina:** so what are you going to do in your winter
              vacation↑
02   **TS:** winter vacation↑ yeah I still have to work
              yes and I am trying to find some (.) kind of
              sending out my resume to find a job after
              my graduation (.) yeah
03   **Tina:** so what job do you prefer↑
04   **TS:** I wish to be a secretary or at least some
              assistant in international business company
              (.) but I'm still trying (.) I don't know if I
              can get one
05   **Tina:** so is it easy for just a graduate students to
              have a job↑
06   **TS:** yeah basically it is as long as you start early
              (.) you know if you (.) often the company
              will start to asking people to come from
              since May
07   **Tina:** so the company won't um (.) like prefer
              the students who have graduate
08   **TS:** not (.) not now (.) you know there's have
              been many report talking about there's no
              difference between undergraduate students
              and graduate students (.) so it's really an
              advantage for us to find a job

Tina, in her reflection report, highlighted that culture plays an important role in ensuring mutual understanding. She described her view on this by making the following comments in her reflection report.

> When I talked to the Filipino student, she always waited for me to continue the next sentence or next topic. I had to think hard to open another interesting topic and tried to make the conversation smoothly. However, when I talked to the Taiwanese student, the conversation went well automatically. I don't have to think hard to start topics or continue the sentences. Sometimes, we even know the meaning from only the eye contact. Because of the same cultural background, some words don't have to be fully explained by word.

Despite the language used for the role-play with the Filipino student and the Taiwanese student being English, Tina suggests that the addressee's culture determines the level of mutual understanding that she can achieve even without verbal exchange. Tina also added in the post-event interview that she sees communicating with the local Taiwanese student more as 'information exchange,' while she sees her interaction with the exchange student more like 'cultural exchange.' Her perception of the 'information exchange' with the Taiwanese student is evident in line 5 of Extract 5 where she requests some information from the Taiwanese student about the possibility of finding jobs after graduation.

Irene's reflection report suggests that she was deliberate about introducing different topics to different interlocutors with different cultural backgrounds. She noted the following in her reflection report.

> With the exchange student, we started out first with short self-introductions, and then I tried to talk more about places worth visiting in Taiwan and suggest activities for her to do during her visit. We did not have a lot in common, so I deliberately stuck to topics related to traveling around in Taiwan. With the Taiwanese student, we talked about winter vacation plans. If I had been discussing this topic with the exchange student, I probably would have to explain things in detail to her. Because the Taiwanese student and I were familiar around Taiwan, we did not have to elaborate much for the other to understand.

From Irene's account, it can be said that the fact that the participants consistently introduced culturally-oriented topics with the exchange student and addressee-oriented topics with the local Taiwanese student was not random; the participants were deliberately organizing their topics to suit their conversational partner.

The participants also noted that they had different level of politeness depending on the cultural background of the addressee. Ella noted that despite her curiosity, she was very careful not to appear impolite to the exchange student.

> I was concerned about getting too personal. I notice that Chinese people feel more comfortable with personal questions than people from western countries. When Chinese meet a new friend, they love to know "everything" about him. I mean "everything" like what his parents does, what kind of job he has, how much he earns, etc. So when I talked to the Filipino student, I kept reminding myself not to do that because she wasn't from here and those types of question might make her feel uncomfortable.

As can be seen from Ella's comment in her reflection report, while Ella was curious about the Filipino student, she was also conscious of not wishing to offend the Filipino student by introducing topics that may appear to be too personal. A similar account was made by Angela who made the following comment in her reflection report.

> One big difference between the two conversation is that when I was talking to the foreign student, I tried to avoid questions that I didn't know whether they would be appropriate to them or not. Because we are born in different places and are given the education differently, we are may have different opinions and reaction on various situations and questions.

Despite Angela's strong consciousness of politeness when interacting with the exchange student, she carelessly introduced a topic which she thought might not be appropriate to the exchange student. Consider Extract 6.

Extract 6 [Angela and the Filipino student (FS)]

```
01    Angela: are we the same (.) age↑
02    FS: um
03    Angela: is this polite to ask you (laughs)↑
04    FS: yes it's ok (laughs)
05    Angela: thank you (laughs)
06    FS: we're good with that (laughs) I'm 19
07    Angela: oh
08    FS: and you↑
09    Angela: I'm 20
```

In line 1 of Extract 6, Angela asks the Filipino student's age. Angela expressed her view of asking this question in her post-event interview as follows.

> I was conscious that I had to be careful with not asking questions that may appear as inappropriate from the perspective of the Filipino student. But I carelessly asked her age since I tend to ask that question to other students here in Taiwan. At the moment I asked her age, I realized that I've carelessly slipped this question from my mouth. Although I knew asking age is acceptable between Taiwanese college students, I thought I'd ask the exchange student if this was an appropriate question immediately after I asked her. I felt so relieved when she said it's ok.

From Angela's comment, it is apparent that she was highly conscious of the politeness in the intercultural encounter and it was just a careless mistake for her to ask the exchange student's age.

The high level of consciousness of politeness by the participants when they interacted with the exchange student can also increase their nervousness during the intercultural exchange. Lara expressed the following view in her reflection report.

> Since I didn't know Philippine and its culture much, I was worried that I couldn't come up with proper topics to talk about if she was not asking question, and I might unintentionally mention something that possibly happened to be sort of like "taboo" in her culture. As for the Taiwanese student, although I was worried and nervous still, I felt slightly more eased because I knew that our living environment and culture might be a bit more alike.

It can be inferred from Lara's account that her uncertainty about what constitutes politeness in the exchange student's culture caused her to become more nervous in her

interaction with the exchange student. This is supported by Gudykunst and Shapiro's (1996) claim that an individual can experience a greater degree of uncertainty in communicating with members from a different group than with those from the same group. Thus, it can be argued that Lara's nervousness might have been greatly reduced if she had known some suitable topics for intercultural small talk.

Rachel also expressed that she was more nervous when she engaged in small talk with the exchange student compared to small talk with the local Taiwanese student. She expressed her reason for such nervousness in her interview as follows.

> When I interacted with the exchange student, I was particularly nervous because I was afraid of my intended message not comprehended entirely by the exchange student due to our cross-cultural differences. This was not a problem when I interacted with the local student since we share the same culture. So even if I expressed my thoughts in poor English, I knew the local student could understand my intended message.

As Rachel's comment shows, when the interlocutor is from the same culture as hers, there is a certain degree of reassurance that the interlocutor would understand what she means. Such reassurance seems to be absent in intercultural encounters. Therefore, it can be said that one can become more nervous in intercultural small talk than in intracultural small talk as there is an absence of the common codes that exist between the cultures in intercultural small talk.

CONCLUSION

This research has shown the range of topics Taiwanese university students introduce in their intercultural and intracultural small talk. Despite the fact that English was used in both instances of small talk, the participants introduced different topics in their small talk with the exchange student and the local student. The participants also consistently expressed that they found that their interactions with the exchange and the local student differed. The participants saw their interaction with the exchange student more as a 'cultural exchange' while they saw their interaction with the local student more as an 'information exchange.' The difference in topics they introduced in their intercultural and intracultural small talk reflects a consciousness of the interlocutors' cultural background. The study also indicates that the participants were noticeably more curious and also sensitive regarding politeness when the interlocutor was the exchange student, but less so with the local Taiwanese student, and that these differences led the participants to organize their topics differently during the small talk role-plays.

Based on the findings from this study, it can be argued that in developing Taiwanese students' ability to engage in small talk in English in intercultural encounters, merely creating opportunities for them to practice small talk in English with their peers who share the same cultural background may not be sufficient to actually help them develop the required skills. As the findings of this study have shown, such interactions with their peers, who share the same cultural background, may not reflect directly on how they would actually perform in intercultural small talk. Therefore, instructors of English or cross-cultural communication-related courses could organize some intercultural exchanges between exchange students and local students to facilitate the students' development of the skills required to engage in small talk in intercultural encounters. Since intercultural contact has been known to have a positive effect on foreign language learning (Csizér & Kormos, 2008; Kormos & Csizér, 2007), it is expected that such intercultural exchanges would be highly beneficial for the students. Furthermore, since some students may feel nervous about interacting with foreign students due to their uncertainty of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate topics in the foreign students' culture, instructions regarding suitable topics in intercultural encounters may help the students to overcome such nervousness when they engage in small talk with foreign students in the future.

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