

Topic Management of Learners of Thai as a Foreign Language at a University in Singapore

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Sasiwimol Klayklueng¹, Adisorn Prathoomthin²

Abstract

This exploratory study investigates topic management in learners of Thai as a foreign language at a public university in Singapore. A pair-based role-play task was employed to engage the student participants, from beginners, pre-intermediate and intermediate proficiency levels in discussion, with a particular focus on topic continuity. It is believed that role-play tasks can help develop interpersonal skills in learners (Ramana & Parvathi, 2012), as well as providing an insightful tool to measure learners' interactional competence. The findings suggest that the learners from different proficiency levels demonstrated a range of interactional competencies in the area of topic continuity. The beginners fulfilled the task requirements with some linguistic errors in utterance, while the pre-intermediate learners appeared to demonstrate more linguistic competence than the beginners, but failed to develop the topic to fulfil the task requirements. In the intermediate learners, the two pairs of students produced contradictory results in that one pair was the most pragmatically competent in topic maintenance, while the other showcased the weakest management of topic continuity.

1. Introduction and Literature review

1.1 Interactional Competence and Language Proficiency

In the same vein of research on interactional competence and language proficiency is Galaczi's (2014) study on learners' interactional management in paired speaking tests. Based on Cambridge English speaking tests, candidates were categorized according to four bands of language proficiencies, with twelve pairs in each band of varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Each pair was given multiple tasks with an examiner/interviewer, although

¹ Thai Studies Programme, Centre for Language Studies (CLS), National University of Singapore (NUS)

² Institute of International Language and Culture, Chiangrai Rajabhat University

the interactions were not controlled by the examiner. Their results showed a direct correlation between the development of IC and general language; more proficient language users showed higher efficiency as speakers and listeners and therefore demonstrate a higher level of IC. However, their study called for a broader scope of IC to be considered, such as between-turn topic development, which is an aspect of topic-continuity which this study seeks to investigate.

1.2 Discourse Approach to Topic Continuity

The notion of topic at the macro level of discourse, otherwise known as discourse topic, will in this paper follow the definition by Todd (2011), which is the “topics of ideationally coherent stretches of discourse ranging from a single sentence to a couple of paragraphs.” In order to investigate topic continuity, it will be useful to understand discourse topic analysis of which there are several popular methods worth mentioning, including the theme-rheme analysis (Connor, 1996), given-new progression (Chafe & Li, 1976) and lexical analysis (Hoey, 1991).

In the theme-rheme analysis, sentence-level topics are analysed in a topic-comment approach. Namely, the theme is what the sentence is about, and the rheme is what is being said about the theme (Connor, 1996). Identifying themes and rhemes in sentences will allow one to analyze how the subsequent sentences are associated with one another. When observing topic continuity, a theme-rheme progression can be distinguished, where succeeding sentences have the same theme. If no progression is observed, one can observe a coherence break (Wikborg, 1990), that showcases a change in topic and marks topic discontinuity. Themes can therefore be separated according to coherence breaks, which allows for one to identify the topic in the discourse.

Secondly, in the given-new progression analysis, sentence-level topics are observed as both psychological and linguistic. According to Chafe (1976), given information refers to the information in the consciousness of the recipient, whilst new information is the information that is being introduced into the recipient’s consciousness. Although consciousness is difficult to quantify, aspects of given information can be characterised by ellipted material, pronominalized material, and noun phrases with definite articles. Identifying given and new information allows one to discern given-new progression, which similar to the theme-rheme analysis, is bounded by given-new coherence breaks. These

breaks are indicated by given information, which therefore act as markers of topic-discontinuity.

Thirdly, in lexical analysis, networks of lexical items in a discourse are examined to identify a topic. This is achieved by observing the recurrences of lexical items across sentences, such as repetitions or paraphrases of lexical items (Hoey, 1991). These recurrences act as cohesive links between sentences, and when sentences have a number of links above a certain predetermined level, they become bonded sentences. Bonded sentences are important since they are often markers of topic-opening sentences, with no preceding bonded sentences (and the opposite works for topic-closing sentences). With this analysis, boundaries between topics can be identified according to the weightage of lexical items of sentences in a discourse.

With these three broad analyses of topics in mind, discerning what a topic is according to these approaches will make more sense in the following literature that looks at specific measures of analysing topic continuity in discourse.

In Mentis' (1994) approach to topic maintenance in discourse, it is argued that the discourse topic must be both locally and globally coherent. Local coherence refers to the logical relations between two consecutive propositional utterances, whilst global coherence refers to the overall semantic connectedness of discourse and the relevance of each utterance to the topic under discussion. These cohesive links can be analysed via 5 major parameters:

- 1) Length of the topic/sub-topic sequence (topic length)
- 2) Topic-maintaining utterances that contribute novel information
- 3) Topic-maintaining utterances that do not add information to the ideational development of the topics
- 4) Side sequence utterances
- 5) Problematic utterances

Whilst the first parameter of topic length showcases the development of the topic, the second parameter is an indicator of which speaker actively contributes to topic maintenance. This is insightful as it showcases which speaker is responsible for topic development. The third parameter accounts for repetition and back-channel responses which as mentioned earlier by Hoey, (1991) is one method of discerning topic in discourse. Lastly, the final two parameters of analysis of side sequences and problematic utterances

act as an indication of ambiguity, dissociations and incompleteness of topics. These can also be seen as coherence breaks (Wikborg, 1990), which as used in given-new information and lexical analysis, act as markers of topic change and the discontinuity of a topic.

In other works of measuring topic continuity in discourse is Givon (1983), who sees topicality as a “non-discrete entity” or a “multi-point scale which has a functional dimension in discourse” (Givon 1983 in Roth-Johnson, 1993, pp. 45). According to Givon, in order to maintain cohesiveness of a text, three types of discourse continuity can be observed. These include (i) thematic continuity, (2) action continuity, and (3) topics/participants continuity. These discourses can be evaluated according to where the topic is positioned in the discourse, the distance of the topic from its last appearance, the thematic paragraph structure, clustering of topic with other potential interfering topics, and topic persistence in the following discourse. Givon lays out 3 main measurements to showcase this as in Table 1.

Measure	Explanation	Measures: Numerical Expression
Referential distance (“look-back”)	Gap between previous occurrence in the discourse of a topic and its current occurrence in a clause	No. of clauses to the left. Ranges from 1 to 20.
Potential interference (ambiguity)	Disruptive effect which other referents within the immediately preceding register may have on topic availability or identification within a clause	No. of semantically compatible referents within 1-5 clauses to the left with the predicate of the clause as the topic under consideration. No interfering referent value = 1, one referent value =2
Persistence (“decay”)	Topic’s importance in discourse, gauge of speaker’s topical intent	No. of clauses to the right in which the topic/participant continues as an uninterrupted presence as a semantic argument of the clause. Ranges from 0 to infinity.

Table 1: Measures of Topic Continuity, according to Givon's (1983) framework

In Givon's analysis, the clause is the simplest processing unit in human discourse and is therefore used to analyse topic continuity across the three measures. Whilst his analysis suggests that there is a direct correlation between message and code, Givon recognizes that "topic markers exist along a complex functional continuum", and his analysis is not perfect.

Another aspect of topic continuity in discourse is the use of personal pronouns as shown in Spanish discourse by Zulaica-Hernández (2016). By contrasting the use of personal pronouns with demonstratives, Zulaica-Hernández's study showcased how personal pronouns are preferred as topical antecedents while demonstratives are preferred as non-topical antecedents. Her study concluded that direct object personal pronouns act as topic continuity markers in Spanish discourse and contribute to topic coherence. Conversely, demonstrative noun phrases are markers of (sub)-topic shifts, namely that of focalising referents, where they reintroduce suspended or declining topics.

2. The Study

This exploratory study aims at investigating topic management in learners of Thai as a foreign language at a public university in Singapore, with a particular focus on topic continuity. Twelve students, two pairs for each level of proficiency, from beginners 2 (Thai 2), pre-intermediate (Thai 3) and intermediate (Thai 4) courses were invited to take part in the role-play. Thai courses are offered as electives to undergraduate and postgraduate students across the university. Each course contains 52 hours; students are required to attend two 2-hour lessons weekly, throughout a 13-week semester. The main objectives of each module are to equip learners with communicative competence and develop their Thai language skills.

This study makes use of a pair-based role-play task to engage students in discussion. According to Hu (2015), investigation of interactional competence could be more readily accessible through role-play tasks than other type of discussion pair work. Role-play has also been used as a tool to promote interpersonal skills (Ramana & Parvathi, 2012), and is therefore pragmatically insightful to gauge student's interactional competence for this study.

Before starting the conversation, each pair of students was given 5 minutes to prepare the conversation. During this, the students were allowed to ask the researcher

about some useful vocabulary and expressions which they might need while conducting the role-play. The audio recording was performed during the actual conversation, which in fact took place approximately 5 minutes per pair. The researcher then transcribed the students' conversations for further discussion.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings will be discussed according to the analysis of topic maintenance inclusive of the five parameters as discussed by Mentis (2004). The findings are organized according to the Thai proficiency levels of the participants.

3.1 Thai 2 Learners

In the general findings of the Thai 2 learners, it appears that all pairs were interactionally competent in topical maintenance. By aligning themselves to both local and global coherence, the pairs had minimal problematic utterances and actively sought to develop the topic through their efforts seen in repetition and back-channelling.

In the first pair, (E) and Tim (T) actively helped one another to maintain the topic of getting directions to Tim's house, and can be seen as interactionally compatible with one another in that one's linguistic difference was not observed. There was a great use of repetition by both parties, which act as both monitor sequences and repair sequences (Morris-Adam's, 2013) that seek to ensure that referents are in tune with the topic. Both parties also actively contributed novel information that addressed the main points of the role play with clear organization of points. Although Tim later had a problematic utterance where he initiated a question asking where he was, Eddie carried out another repair sequence, and contributed to topic maintenance. It is therefore observed that both parties were globally and locally coherent in topic continuity.

E: Hallo สวัสดีครับ [พี่ Tim]

E: *Hallo, sawatdee# [Brother Tim.]**

T: [สวัสดีครับ] ถึงแล้วเหรอครับ

T: *[Sawatdee.] You have reached, huh?*

E: ใช่ครับ ตอนนี้ผมที่ อะ ที่สถานี Bishan อะ แต่ผมไม่รู้ อะ ไปบ้านคุณยังไง (1.5) ช่วยบอกผมว่า อะ ไปบ้านคุณยังไงครับ

E: Yes. I'm now at, uh, at Bishan station. Uh, but I don't know, uh, how to go to your house. (1.5) Can you tell me, uh, how to get there?

T: ครับ ไม่ไม่เท่าไรครับ เออ แล้วเออ Ok... อืม Eddie จะ (3.5) ไป ทางออก A ก่อน เออแล้วก็จะ เห็นไปรษณีย์ อืม เห็นไปรษณีย์แล้ว เออ เลี้ยวซ้าย อืม ตรงไป ตรงไปถึงอ่า บัมน้ำมัน ถึง-ถึง บัมน้ำมันแล้ว อ่า เลี้ยวขวา เดินไปนิดเดียว จะถึงเออ เตี้ยวะนะ Block-Block สี่สี่สามครับ แล้วอ่า

T: Yes, it's n-not much. Err, then, err, okay... Mm, you^o (3.5) go to Exit A first, err then you'll... you'll see a post office, mm, after you see it, err, turn left, mm, walk straight, walk straight until, ahh, the petrol station. After r-reaching the petrol station, ahh, turn right, walk a little bit further and you'll reach, err, wait a moment... Block-block 443. Then, ahh...

E: ครับ

E: Oh I see.

T: ถึงแล้วจะ เอ็ม (1.0) โทรฯมาบอกผมนะ ผมจะ-จะ ลง เอ๊ะ อะไรวะ

T: After reaching, erm (1.0), call me, okay? I'll-I'll... go down... eh? What is it...

E: อะ... ใช่ครับ อ่า... ถ้ายังนั่น ผม อะ (1.0) ใกล้ถึงบ้านคุณแล้วผมจะโทรฯไปหาคุณ เพราะต้อง อ่า เพราะ (1.0) ช่วยคุณ อะ ลงมา (1.0) ข้างล่าง อะ ช่วยถึง อะ (1.0) ชื่อของ

E: Uh... yes, ahh... In that case, I, uh (1.0), when I am about to reach your house, I will call you, because you need to, ahh... because (1.0) you need to come (1.0) downstairs, uh, to help carry, uh (1.0) buy things.

T: [ครับ ครับ ครับ]

T: [Oh, sure, sure.]

E: [ช่วยช่วย] ช่วยถึงเออเอ ชื่อ ของ

E: [H-help...] help to reach, uh, carry... things.

T: ok ครับ ได้ครับ แล้ว เตี้ยวะจะ โทรฯ มาอะครับ

T: Okay, sure. Then, call me later, alright?

E: ครับ สวัสดีครับ

E: Okay. Sawatdee.

Cultural Notes:

#Sawatdee [sawatdi:] is the Thai greeting for “hello” and “goodbye”, usually appended with “khrub” [k^hrap] or “kha” [k^ha] at the back as a polite particle as in *sawatdeekhrub*. *A younger person usually addresses someone older as “พี่” or [p^hi:] which means “elder

sibling” even if they are not related by blood, a kinship feature that is prevalent in many Asian cultures. In Thai culture, one can refer to oneself or the other person by using the name or kinship term (e.g. พี่) instead of the first person and second person pronouns. It is similar to how mothers refer to themselves in front of their children as “Mommy” as in “*Stay right here because Mommy will be back soon, okay?*”.

In the second pair from Thai 2, it is observed that Jess and Jan are more collaborative in their topic maintenance as more turns were taken between the two in topic-continuity. Although their responses were shorter as compared to Eddie and Tim, topic maintenance was smoother in that directions were still given but in a natural sequential order that matched the task of the phone call in the role-playing task. Novel information was equally produced by each party and contributed to topic development. It is also observed that the usage of both repetitions and back-channels were efforts by both parties to ensure that the correct referents were produced to ensure they remained relevant to the topic. This pair faced a similar problem to Eddie and Tim, where one problematic utterance was faced by Jan who exclaimed “what” that initiated another repair by Jess, who helped her remain relevant to the topic by explaining her task during her turn. It is therefore observed that both Jess and Jan sustained topic management successfully.

JESS: สวัสดีค่ะ

JESS: *Sawatdee.*

JAN: สวัสดีค่ะ Jess

JAN: *Sawatdee, Jess.*

JESS: ดิฉันถึง เอ็ม สถานี Bishan แล้ว ไปบ้านคุณยังไงคะ

JESS: *I have reached, erm, Bishan station. How can I get to your house?*

JAN: โอ้ เอ็ม (1.0) คุณ เออ เดินไป (1.0) เดินไปทางออก A แล้วเอ่อ คุณจะถึงเออสถานี เอ่อ ไม่ใช่สถานี คุณจะถึง เออ ถนน Bishan อ่า สามสิบ แล้ว

JAN: *Oh, erm (1.0), you, err, walk... (1.0) walk to Exit A, then, err, you will reach, err, the station. Err, not the station, you will reach, err, Bishan Street, ahh, 30.*

JESS: ใช่ๆ ถึงแล้ว

JESS: *Yes, yes! I've reached.*

JAN: ได้ค่ะ แล้ว อะเลี้ยวซ้าย

JAN: *Okay. Then, uh, turn left.*

JESS: ok ค่ะ

JESS: Okay.

JAN: แล้วเดินตรงไป ถึงสี่-สี่-สี่แยก สี่แยก

JAN: Then walk straight until the int-int-intersection, intersection.

JESS: เห็นแล้วค่ะเห็นแล้ว

JESS: I see it, I see it.

JAN: โอ้ เร็วๆ มาก แล้ว เอ็ม Jess จะอา แล้วเลี้ยวขวา

JAN: Oh, that's very fast! So, erm, you shall, ahh, turn right.

JESS: Ok ค่ะ ไปที่ Giant supermarket ไซ้ไหมคะ

JESS: Okay. Walk to Giant supermarket, am I right?

JAN: ไซ้ค่ะ โอ้เห็นแล้วไซ้ไหม

JAN: Yes. Oh! You've seen it, right?

JESS: ไซ้

JESS: Yes.

JAN: ok จะถึง Giant supermarket แล้ว เอ็ม จะแล้วเลี้ยวซ้าย

JAN: Okay, reaching Giant supermarket, erm, turn left.

JESS: ok ค่ะ

JESS: Okay.

JAN: แล้วคุณเห็น เออ ตึกเออ สี่-สี่-สี่ร้อยสี่สิบสามไซ้ไหม

JAN: Then you'll see, err, Block, err, f-f-four hundred and forty-three, right?

JESS: เออ เห็น ไซ้

JESS: Err, I see it, yes.

JAN: ok ค่ะแล้ว เอ็ม บ้านดิฉันเออชั้นที่เจ็ด เลขที่หนึ่ง

JAN: Okay, then, erm, my house, err, story 7, unit number 1.

JESS: [ok ค่ะ]

JESS: [Okay]

JAN: [แล้วคุณ]จะ เออ เออ what โอ้แล้วเออ ดิฉันจะอา (1.0) จะล้างมา เออ ข้างล่าง ข้างหลัง

JAN: [Then you]'ll, err, err, what... oh! Then, err, I shall, ahh (1.0), shall come, err, downstairs, downstairs.

JESS: ok ค่ะ

JESS: Okay.

JAN: ดิฉันจะช่วยเออ ช่วยถือถุงปลา (0.5) สติก

JAN: *I will help, err, help to carry the plastic bags.*

JESS: ok ค่ะ แล้วเจอกัน

JESS: *Okay. See you.*

JAN: แล้วเจอกัน

JAN: *See you.*

3.2 Thai 3 Learners

The two pairs of the level 3 Thai group were generally competent in ensuring topic continuity despite the fact that the first pair did not fulfil the task requirements. Compared to the topic management of the Thai 2 pairs, it would seem that the Thai 3 pairs paled in comparison.

When observing the same task of getting directions to the other person's house which develops into the topic of helping the other to carry groceries, the first pair, Winson (W) and Jing Hong (J), failed to maintain the topic long enough to initiate the task of helping with carrying the groceries. The number of turns taken to develop this topic is also observably shorter than the pairs in Thai 2, which in line with parameter 1 of Mentis' analysis, reveals a weaker level of topic maintenance. However, the topic was still developed sufficiently in that both parties contributed novel information and made use of repetition and back-channels to ensure that the referents remained on topic. There were no problematic utterances observed, however this must be considered in the failure to complete the task given.

J: โอ้ สวัสดี Winson ครับ (0.5) เอ้อ ผมมาถึงสถานีรถไฟฟ้า Bishan แล้วครับ

J: *Oh! Sawatdee, Winson (0.5)! Err, I... have reached Bishan MRT Station.*

W: ครับ คุณเห็น Exit A ของ เอ้อ (1.0) รถไฟฟ้า Bishan ไหมครับ

W: *Oh, do you see Exit A of, err (1.0) Bishan station?*

J: รอสักครู่ นะครับ (0.5) โอ้ เห็นแล้ว

J: *Wait a moment... (0.5) Oh, I see it!*

W: เห็นแล้วคุณจะ เอ้อ ตรงไป นะครับ เดินตรงไป เดินตรงไป แล้วก็ (0.5) ก็ต้อง (0.5) ไป ทางสาย นะครับ คุณเห็น Pump Shell ไหมครับ

W: *After seeing it, you shall, err, walk straight, okay? Walk straight, walk straight and then (0.5)... then... go to the left. Do you see Shell petrol station?*

J: ใช่เห็นแล้ว

J: Yes, I see it.

W: เห็นแล้วคุณต้อง ไปทางขวา แล้วก็ แล้วก็คุณก็จะเห็น (0.5) Supermarket Giant ครับ

W: After seeing it, you must go to the right, then, hah, then you will see (0.5) Giant supermarket.

J: เห็นแล้ว พูดต่อครับ

J: I see it. Please continue telling me the directions.

W: เห็นแล้วเอ้อบ้านผมอยู่ (0.5) เอ้อ ทางหน้า Supermarket Giant แล้ว [เอ้อ]

W: After see it, err, my house (0.5), err, in front of Giant supermarket. [Err.]

J: [ใช่] ใช่เห็นแล้ว

J: [Yes], yes I see it.

W: ถ้ายังงั้น คุณรอผม เอ้อ (2.5) ที่ชั้นที่หนึ่งได้ไหมครับ ผมจะไป (4.0) ไปพาผมนะครับ

W: In that case, can you wait for me... err... (2.5) on the first floor? I will go... (4.0) go to bring you up.

J: ตกลงครับ ผมจะ เอ้อ รอคุณอยู่ข้างล่างครับ

J: Sure. I'll, err, wait for you downstairs.

W: โอเคครับ ขอบคุณมากครับ

W: Okay. Thank you very much!

J: แล้วเจอกันครับ

J: See you.

W: แล้วเจอกัน ครับ

W: See you.

In the second pair with the same focus of topic, Wei Qi (W) and Kevin (K) observably were able to develop the topic competently in that their topic length was observably longer than Jing Hong's and Winson's. The turns were also sequentially organized well to allow novel information to be produced by both parties that contributed to topic maintenance. There was also the use of repetitions and back-channels that elicited an effort in both parties to monitor their speech and ensure that referents made relate to the topic at hand. A problematic utterance occurred when Kevin chose to close the topic before the fulfilment of the last task, to which Wei Qi responded with an "Oh no", signalling the need for topic continuity for both parties. It is therefore seen as a collaboratively competent move in spite of the interruption since the other initiated

repair/warning ultimately helped Kevin develop the topic enough to complete the task at hand.

K: อ่า ผม-ผมเพิ่งถึงสถานี Bishan ไปบ้านของคุณยังไงครับ ผมลืมแล้ว

K: *Ahh, I-I just reached Bishan station. How can I get to your house? I've forgotten.*

W: okay เอ่อ ตอนนี้ อ่า คุณต้อง ออกไป อ่า จากทางออก A คุณเห็นไปรษณีย์ไหม

W: *Okay. Err, now, um, you must exit, uh, from Exit A. Do you see the post office?*

K: เอ่อ... เห็นแล้วครับ

K: *Err... I see it.*

W: ตอนนี้เอ่อ เลี้ยวซ้าย แล้วคุณจะเห็นสี่แยกไข่มุขไหมครับ

W: *Now, err, turn right, then you will see an intersection, right?*

K: เอ... คิดว่าได้-คิดว่าใช่ครับ

K: *Eh... I think yes-I think so.*

W: เออเดินไปที่สี่แยก แล้วเลี้ยวขวา แล้วคุณจะเห็นปั้มน้ำมัน Shell]

W: *Err, walk to the intersection then turn right and you will see Shell [petrol station.]*

K: [รอ รอ] ยังไม่ ยังไม่ถึง

K: *[Wait, wait], I've not, I've not reach yet.*

W: Ok ไม่เป็นไรครับ (1.5) ถึง[แล้วหรือเปล่า]

W: *Okay, it's okay. (1.5) Have you [reached or not?]*

K: [ถึงแล้ว ถึงแล้ว]

K: *[I've reached, I've reached.]*

W: โอเคครับ

W: *Okay.*

K: [เห็นสี่แยกแล้ว]

K: *[I see the intersection]*

W: [แล้วคุณจะเห็น] สี่แยกแล้ว เลี้ยวขวา

W: *[Then you'll see] the intersection and turn right.*

K: ครับ

K: *Okay.*

W: แล้วคุณจะเห็นปั้มน้ำมันอยู่ทางซ้ายไข่มุขไหมครับ

W: *Then you will see the petrol station on the left, right?*

K: เอ่ ใช่ครับ

K: *Eh, yes.*

W: แล้ว เดินตรงไป แล้วคุณเห็น อ่า supermarket Giant ใช่ไหมครับ อยู่ทางขวา

W: *Then, walk straight and you will see, ah, Giant supermarket, right? On the right.*

K: อ่า ใช่ ใช่ครับ

K: *Ah! Yes, yes.*

W: อ่า ตอนนี้คุณเห็นอ่าตึก เบอร์ สี่สี่สาม ใช่ไหมครับ

W: *Ahh, now you see, um, Block 443, right?*

K: เอ๋ เห็น... มองไม่เห็นเลย

K: *Eh, see... I don't see it.*

W: อยู่... อยู่... ตรงข้าม supermarket ครับ

W: *It's... it's... opposite the supermarket.*

K: อ้า ครับ

K: *Ah. Okay.*

W: โอเคครับผม อ่าผม ผมจะมารับคุณตอนนี้

W: *Okay, I'll, um, I'll pick you up now.*

K: ขอบคุณครับ ผมกำลังรออยู่

K: *Thank you. I'm waiting.*

W: oh no

W: *Oh no.*

K: oh oh oh ใช่ ใช่ เออ ช่วย ลง มา ข้าง ล่าง เอ่า อ่าม ชื้อ ของ ของ ที่ผมซื้อ

K: *Oh, oh, oh, yea, yea. Err, Can. You. Come. Down. Stairs. Err, um, buy. Things. Things. That I bought.*

W: ผม-ผมมาตอนนี้ครับ

W: *I-I'm coming now.*

3.3 Thai 4 Learners

Data drawn from the Thai 4 pairs produced rather conflicting results since the first pair provided strong topic continuity whilst the second pair of students showed a lack of competency in topic continuity.

The first pair of Thai 4 involving Yi Xian (Y) and Valerie (V) showed a strong development of the topic, with one of the longest topic lengths out of all the pairings. The pair of students also managed to successfully address all components of the task given. Novel information was also produced equally by both interlocutors and was

organized in a clearly sequential manner that allowed collaborative topic development. Whilst repetition and back-channels were used to ensure that referents remained on point to the topic, they were not repeated as many times as the other pairs of students, which could perhaps be the result of a stronger linguistic repertoire. A potential interference in topic continuity was met with a locally coherent reminder by Valerie to Yi Xian which ensured topic maintenance. This can be observed when Yi Xian directed Valerie to the seventh floor of her house, forgetting the task of going downstairs to help with carrying the groceries. Valerie maintained the topic by first asking her what seventh floor meant, and after an oblivious reply from Yi Xian, Valerie then proceeded to remind Yi Xian to meet her at the ground floor. This collaborative interchanging between the interlocutors ensured topic continuity with no problematic utterances and can therefore be analysed as the strongest management of topic amongst all the pairings.

Y: *phone ringing* สวัสดีค่ะ

Y: *phone ringing* Sawatdee.

V: เอ้ สวัสดีค่ะคุณ Yi Xian ดิฉัน อ่า ตอนนี้ดิฉัน เื่อ ถึงสถานที่ Bishan แล้ว แต่ดิฉันไม่รู้ว่ เื่อ บ้านคุณอยู่ที่ไหน

V: *Eh? Sawatdee, Ms Yi Xian. I, ahh, now I, err, have reached Bishan station, but I don't know, err, how to get to your house.*

Y: ออ คุณเห็นทางออก A และ B ไหม

Y: *Oh, do you see Exit A and Exit B?*

V: อืม โ้เห็นแล้ว

V: *Mm, oh, I see them!*

Y: คุณต้อง เื่อ ออกจากทางออก A...

Y: *You must, err, exit from Exit A...*

V: ค่ะ

V: *Okay.*

Y: ...แล้วคุณต้องเลี้ยวซ้าย เลี้ยวซ้ายแล้ว

Y: *... then you must turn left... turn left.*

V: โ้อโ้อ โ้อโ้อ โ้อโ้อโ้อ รอรอสักครู่

V: *Woah, woah woah woah... wait, wait a moment!*

Y: ฮ่าๆๆๆ

Y: *Hahahaha!*

V: โอ้ อากาศร้อนมาก และมะม่วง มะม่วงหนักมาก โอโฮๆ ok ok ค่ะ

V: *Oh! The weather is so hot, and the mangoes, the mangoes are so heavy! Wow, wow, okay, okay.*

Y: ok อยู่ คุณอยู่ที่ไหน

Y: *Okay. Where, where are you?*

V: อ่า อยู่ที่ เอ่อ อยู่ที่ Bi- Bishan NPC ค่ะ

V: *Ahh, I'm at, err, I'm at Bi-Bishan NPC.*

Y: โอ้โฮ คุณต้อง U-turn นะ

Y: *Woah, you must U-turn!*

V: โอ้ๆ!

V: *Oh, oh!*

Y: คุณ อะ เห็น (3.0) Pu-Pump น้ำมัน (1.0) ไหม Shell Shell

Y: *You, uh, do you see (3.0) Shell? Shell petrol st-station.*

V: เห็นแล้วๆ

V: *I see it, I see it.*

Y: Ok คุณ เออ เดินไป แล้วคุณจะเห็น (0.5) เออ HDB สาม (2.0) ตึก

Y: *Okay, you, err, walk and you'll see (0.5), err, three HDB buildings.*

V: โอ้ เห็นแล้ว เห็นแล้ว

V: *Oh, I see them, I see them!*

Y: เออ Block ของดิฉันคือ ซิซี้ซ้ามนะ

Y: *Err, my block is 443, okay?*

V: ค่ะ

V: *Okay.*

Y: แล้วคุณต้อง (1.5) ขึ้นถึงชั้นเจ็ด

Y: *Then you must (1.5) go up to "storey 7".*

V: แปลว่าอะไร

V: *What does it mean?*

Y: แปลว่า seventh floor

Y: *It means "seventh floor".*

V: โอ้โฮ Yi Xian คุณควร อะ ลง [ลง]

V: *Woah, Yi Xian, you should, err, come down, [come down]...*

Y: [ลงรับ]คุณใช่ไหม

Y: *[come down to pick] you up, right?*

V: ใช่

V: Yes.

Y: ok ok แล้ว เอ๋อตอนนี้ดิฉันจะ ลงนะ

Y: *Okay, okay. Then, err, now I'll go downstairs, okay?*

V: ดิฉันตื่นแล้ว อะถึงแล้ว

V: *I've reached already.*

Y: ok ok

Y: *Okay, okay.*

V: เร็วๆ เร็วๆ

V: *Quickly, quickly.*

Y: ok แล้วเจอกัน

Y: *Okay, see you.*

V: แล้วเจอกัน (1.0) สวัสดีค่ะ

V: *See you. (1.0) Sawatdee.*

The second pair for Thai 4 with the same focus of topic, although seemingly having a long topic length, there had many problematic utterances that disrupted topic maintenance. The two interlocutors, Jia En (JE) and Nam Cha (NC), seemed to have differential language proficiencies and did not seem to be collaboratively contributing to the topic. When Nam Cha mentioned the directions of Bishan Street 30, Jia En seemed rather confused in her response and did not directly acknowledge the direction in her response. Moreover, when Nam Cha mentioned that she had reached Jia En's house, Jia En continued to give directions to Nam Cha, which was collaboratively not meaningful. The poor management of topic continuity is further highlighted through the prompts of the facilitator that reinforce the problematic utterances of the discourse. Whilst novel information was produced by both parties which helped develop the topic to a certain extent, they were disorganized and met with disruptions that interfered with topic continuity.

NC: เออ สวัสดีค่ะ Jia En เออ บ้านอยู่-บ้านคุณอยู่ที่ไหนคะ

NC: *Err, sawatdee, Jie En. Err, where's-where is your house?*

JE: เออ (6.0)

JE: *Err (6.0)*

NC: ดิฉัน (1.5) เออ จะรอที่-รอคุณที่สถานี Bishan

NC: I (1.5), err, will wait for you at Bishan station.

JE: อา คุณต้อง อา ออกไป Exit A อา เดิน เดินตรง

JE: Ahh, you must, ahh, exit from Exit A, ahh, walk, walk straight...

NC: Bishan Street 30

NC: Bishan 30.

JE: Hmm?

JE: Hmm?

NC: Bishan Street 30

NC: Bishan Street 30.

JE: ออกไป Exit A then อา (2.0) อืม อา หลังจาก อะ หลังจากนั้นคุณต้องเดินตรง ไป จน ถึงคุณ อะ
คุณเห็น อะ อะ Shell Petrol [อา]

JE: Exit from Exit A then, ahh (2.0), mm, ahh, after that, uh, after that you must walk
straight. Until. You, uh, you see, uh, uh, Shell Petrol, [ahh...]

NC: [ค่ะ] เห็น Shell Petrol แล้ว [ไป]

NC: [Oh, okay]. I see Shell Petrol, and [where]...

JE: [อา]

JE: [Ahh.]

NC: ไปไหนจะไปไหน

NC: ...shall I go?

Ajarn Sasiwimol: You're on the phone.

Facilitator: You're on the phone.

NC: but เห็น-เห็น Shell Petrol แล้ว อะ ต้อง ต้องไปไหน

NC: But, after se-seeing Shell Petrol, uh, where must... must I go?

JE: เอ็ม คุณ[ต้อง]

JE: Erm, you [must]...

NC: [ถึง]บ้านคุณ

NC: [Reach] your house?

JE: อืม คุณต้องแล้ว เลี้ยวขวา เลี้ยวขวา อ่า อ่าอยู่ อืม อยู่แถวนี้มีเออ supermarket อา

JE: Mm, you must tun... turn right... turn right. Ahh... ahh, there's... mm... there's a
supermarket in this area. Ahh..

NC: อยู่ตรงข้าม

NC: *Opposite?*

JE: ออะ supermarket อยู่-อยู่ตรงข้าม อะ block สี่สี่สาม

JE: *Ah! Ahh... The supermarket i-is opposite, uh, Block 443.*

NC: ได้ค่ะ เอ็ม ถ้า ถ้าดิฉันถึงบ้านคุณแล้ว เอ็ม ดิฉันจะโทรฯไปหา เอ็ม ช่วยให้ ให้คุณช่วยถือ ถือ plastic ได้ไหม

NC: *Okay. Erm, if, if I have reached your house, erm, I will call you. Erm, help to, can I get you to help carry the plastic bags?*

JE: อ่อ ได้ค่ะอา เมื่อคุณ อีม อะมาถึงแล้วฉันจะ ลงมา ข้างล่าง ช่วยคุณ

JE: *Oh, sure. Ah, when you, mm, uh, have arrived, I'll go downstairs to help you.*

NC: อา สวัสดีค่ะ Jia En ดิฉันอามาถึง อะ Block สี่สี่-สามแล้ว อะ Jia En ช่วย ดิ-Jia En ลงมาข้าง ช่วยเอถือ ถือ Plastic ได้ไหม

NC: *Ah, hello, Jia En. I, ahh, have arrived at, uh, Block 443. Uh, can you help m- can you come downstairs, err, to help me c-carry the plastic bags?*

JE: โอเคค่ะ อา ฉันจะ ลงมาข้างล่าง

JE: *Okay. Ahh, I'll come downstairs.*

NC: เสร็จแล้ว

NC: *It's finished.*

JE: เสร็จแล้ว

JE: *It's finished.*

In conclusion, it would appear that the four pairs demonstrated a range of interactional competencies in terms of topic continuity. Whilst the Thai 2 learners were seemingly hypothesized as less competent, they produced the most consistent data with both pairings fulfilling task requirements with minimal problematic utterances. The Thai 3 learners, although linguistically more competent than the Thai 2 counterparts, produced more problematic utterances and one pair had failed to develop the topic well enough to fulfil task requirements. Finally, the Thai 4 learners produced contradictory results in that one pairing was the most pragmatically competent in topic maintenance whilst the other pairing showcased the weakest management of topic continuity.

These results therefore go against the hypothesis of this study in that the pragmatic proficiency of L2 learners does not correlate to language proficiency. These results reveal a more complex system of pragmatics for second language learners that cannot be

measured against linguistic proficiency, and perhaps entail a greater range of factors such as positive/negative transfer from L1, motivation of interlocutors etc.

4. Implications on Teaching and Limitations of Study

As seen from the contradictory results which did not align with the hypothesis, it would be useful to investigate the pragmatic pedagogies taught in second language classes since it appears to range across the Thai classes at the university. As language proficiency did not correlate to pragmatic proficiency, it may also be useful to investigate the effects of L1 to L2 transfer amongst students of stronger pragmatics and those of weaker pragmatic strategies.

This study is limited in that a small number of pairs from each proficiency level were investigated and may not give an accurate representation of the pragmatic strategies of students across the levels. Moreover, the analysis via Mentis' (1994) approach is interpretative and could yield differing results based on differing interpretations. It would therefore be useful to incorporate Givón's (1983) measures of topic continuity in discourse to yield a qualitatively stronger argument. In addition, the nature of the task, which was a role-playing activity, represents a less realistic portrayal of conversations and topic continuity, and therefore is restricted to the context of second language learning classrooms.

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