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## Foreword

Welcome to the May 2014 issue of the Journal of English as an International Language!

The spectrum of issues, insights and research agendas featured in this issue resonates with EILJ's resolve and remit to foster a plurality of focus and conceptualizations in EIL. Such a bold stance is in keeping with the centrality and primacy of EILJ's declared mission of promoting locally appropriate, culturally sensitive and socially aligned pedagogies and practices. The voice and agency of our contributing authors assume particular prominence and substance in this issue in that they chime in with EILJ's attempts to democratize and dehegemonize the use of English across the cultures of Asia and farther afield.

The joint paper entitled, "Use of first-person plural pronoun to refer to single authors: Analyses of postgraduate theses" by Tanju Deveci and Roger Nunn challenges the often ill-conceived or misconstrued research stance that eschews the use of first person voice through a cowardly avoidance of 'I' pronoun. Attributing such a stance to the hegemonic prevalence of the "so-called non-problematic and objective generalizations" in the discourse of research into language teaching, the authors espouse the use of "I" as an antidote against disguising an academic author's personal agency and voice as well as their deliberate obfuscation. Using an engaging research narrative accruing from a well-informed methodology, the authors verifiably argue as to how and why the use of 'I' can help academic authors avoid the dubious honor of being objective at the expense of forswearing their agency and voice. Given the rampant erosion of voice and agency in the practices of research into language teaching as well as the malaise that has accrued as a result, we hope that the paper will give our readership sufficient pause to challenge the prevalence of the rationalistic-positivist epistemology and its asocial ramifications in EIL's educational practices.

Pham Thi Thanh Xuan's paper, "A study of self-representation of Asian EFL students through speaking English at an Australia University", reports on a study featuring Asian students doing an MA TESOL Masters in Education course at an Australian university. The narratives presented in the study while exploring their move towards self-representation through speaking English in this class, demonstrate that the participants had different ways of representing themselves through participation and interaction. These, as the author points out, were too complex to be understood through the non-problematic and simplistic prism of communicative competence as their self-representation through speaking English is experiential, participative and individual as well as social. In light of this, the author argues that it is necessary to factor in the communicative events by taking advantage of the issues or insights offered by

community of English practice and one's own cultural capital, which taken together can constitute appropriate achievement of self-representation. Based on the findings, the author dismisses the disempowering stereotypes associated with Asian EFL students who are viewed as the inferior, uncritical and passive Other. The argument, then, as the paper underscores, is one that is ideological in that TESOL educators need to help Asian EFL learners successfully achieve self-representation through speaking English and gain access to international English communication environment.

Julia Kim's paper, "Error gravity in a nonnative English speaker's speech: The case of article errors and pluralizing non-count nouns" examines how the linguistic errors made in grammatical functions — articles and noun-count noun plurals — would/might impact the second language speakers' ability to convey their message and how they might be perceived as language users when their speeches contained those errors. Affirming the well-known notion that listeners tend to respond to the pronunciation, the paper argues that the strength of a speaker's accent might/would affect only certain aspects of how the listeners perceived them, which may not be sufficient enough to signal a discernible difference in comprehension. Given that the largest group of EIL speakers is from the expanding circle, the issues and insights discussed in the study underscore the primacy of context-bound characteristics of an EIL setting that can uphold the prevalence of "accommodation principle" as a motivational force in the teaching and learning of EIL. In light of this, the author contends that those users of English who constantly struggle with the complex usage of articles and non-count noun plurals can be helped to believe that these minor errors are unlikely to affect how they are understood and perceived by other English users. Such a realization, as the author points out, has numerous beneficial pedagogical implications for the EIL classroom. Most importantly the accruing value system of "acceptable tolerance" can help mitigate the psychologically unsettling malaise of "one right pronunciation or for that matter one right comprehension" that has stultified our students' language repertoire much to the detriment of their voice and agency.

Shie Sato's paper, "I think: Topic-marking in spoken English discourse" focuses on the shared features between the topic-marking function of pre-verbal *I think* in spoken English discourse and the grammatical topic marker *wa* in Japanese. The methodology featured in the paper, while pointing out the functional links between, 'I think' and the grammatical topic marker *wa* makes an informed attempt to examine the sociolinguistic implications that underlie their use. The dynamics and fall-outs of such an examination offer weighty insights into the current efforts to come to terms with the complex nature of parentheticals in general. In light of this, the author alerts her readership to the sociolinguistic possibilities that emerge when we attempt an expansionistic rather than a simplistic understanding of the commonalities and complementarities along with those

contrastive features of topic markers that operate both in English and Japanese. Needless to say that the author's stance is an eloquent avowal of EILJ's central ethos, her study would serve as a catalyst for further exploration of those broad sociocultural, sociolinguistic and political contents representing the theoretical paradigm and promise of English as an international language.

The joint paper entitled, "Examining the issue of academic procrastination in an Asian EIL context: The case of Omani University students" by Suaad Said Al-Hadhrani, Vijay Singh Thakur and Rahma Al-Mahrooqi investigates the issue of academic procrastination (AP), which comes in the way of Omani EIL students being able to meet assignment deadlines. Factoring in a student-centered approach to the issues posed by AP, the authors display a "wide-theoretical-canvas" so as to provide eclectic as well as humanistic underpinnings to the scale and scope of their study. Analyzing AP from a student perspective, they report on an array of external and internal factors, well supported by research findings that prevent students majoring in English at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) from completing their assignments on time. Drawing on the featured theoretical issues and insights, they alert us as to how psychological, motivational and self-regulatory factors culminate in procrastination. Further to this, the authors underscore the importance of reviewing the phenomenon of procrastination with a definite focus on pedagogically important learning issues such as learning by doing, guided completion of tasks, and learner independence or autonomy. Such a realization, as the paper points to, demands that the educators take cognizance of and attend to the issues of students' attitudes, desire and motivation to learn and complete their tasks and assignments as they progress through their English major courses. Picking up on their well-formulated methodology and discussion of findings, the authors evoke the efficacy of positive reinforcement or facilitative engagement strategies in addition to the prevalence of relaxed concentration in the educational practices of EIL classroom. EILJ believes that the accruing motivational stimuli could not only help students steer clear of AP but could also instill in them the value systems and beliefs that they need in order to become life-long learners rather life-long-stragglers.

The joint paper entitled, "Academic and prestige: Indonesian lecturers' attitudes towards TOEFL" by Nor Suharti Abdul Karim and Nining Ismiyani investigates into the attitudinal issues of the Indonesian lecturers who teach English to students preparing for TOEFL. Given the complexity that such an investigation can entail, the authors make a bold attempt to untangle a host of issues that appear to hegemonize an outlandish view of proficiency in English that is neither context-sensitive nor sociolinguistically amenable. Picking up on the attitudinal fixations of Indonesian lecturers with American norms of proficiency in English, the authors argue that any

attempts to understand and qualify proficiency in English should signpost an acceptance of and willingness to recognise the importance of an Indonesian variety of English. Given its currency in Indonesia, the authors believe that it can act as a viable additive, or, better still, a model for the prevalence and promotion of a local model of English that is both sociolinguistically and academically empowering to the students in their attempts to become proficient in English. Needless to say that such a position can militate against the attitude and prestige position associated with an American model of proficiency predicated on TOEFL, an informed and initiated reception to the local variety of English and its concomitant model of proficiency will go a long way in mitigating the ills that are synonymous with “copycat adoptions” of the American model of English proficiency in Indonesia. This will help students come to terms with the ethos of Indonesian English as they attempt and rehearse their discourses of appropriation. The accruing creativity can add new dimensions to their perceptions of Indonesian English. More importantly, we believe that the study featured in the paper would act as a path-finder to similar investigations into policy formulations and language legislations directed at EIL in different parts of the world, where the ill-informed bureaucrats use language legislations and policies to silence the voice and agency of those people who come under their purview.

In closing, I wish to applaud the resolve and resilience with which the contributing authors of this issue have showcased their alternate discourses of current reckoning. Such endeavors are central to EILJ’s declared mission of creating “a heterogeneous global English speech community, with a heterogeneous English and different modes of competence” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 211). Given this, I am certain that the issues and insights discussed in this issue would serve as a lamp to all of us, who could otherwise be stranded in a “methodological wasteland of EIL”. Read on!

**Dr Sivakumar Sivasubramaniam,  
Chief Editor**



## **Use of First-person Plural Pronoun to Refer to Single Authors: Analyses of Postgraduate Theses**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, we examine the use of the first person plural forms “we”, “us” and “our” when used to refer to single authors. For this purpose, we conducted quantitative and qualitative analyses on two master’s theses and one PhD dissertation written by Turkish authors in their local context of the Middle East Technical University, Turkey. The results of the quantitative analysis showed that although the first person plural pronoun was used by all three authors, the PhD candidate’s use of it was far more frequent, with a heavier focus in the methodology section. We also identified that the possessive adjective “our” was used mainly in the PhD dissertation, which we interpret as competent authorship in academic writing, giving her greater expertise in the field. We also found that the authors tended to use an inclusive “we” in the literature review more frequently to establish that knowledge ownership was shared by themselves and their readers. Their use of inclusive “we” in the results section, on the other hand, was rather for organizational purposes. The absence of first person plural forms in the abstracts and the authors’ general avoidance of them in the introduction and recommendations sections was another important finding of our research. In the light of the results of this study, we suggest that any assertion that authors should avoid the first person plural in referring to themselves as single authors needs reconsidering, and authors’ local contexts and reasons for their use of these pronouns need to be acknowledged in the era of English as a means of international academic communication.

Keywords: first-person plural pronoun, postgraduate theses

### **Introduction**

One criterion for new research papers to be publishable is that they should present their original contribution to the field (Nunn, Deveci, Mansoor, & Babu, 2014). To do this, authors need to establish an authorial voice in their writing. It is true that certain academic environments require authors to write using impersonal language and ask them to avoid the first-person. They claim that this is to ensure objectivity and professionalism. However, we have proposed counterarguments that such an appearance

of objectivity is likely to be an illusion limiting authors' attempts to be clear and transparent, and which merely disguises an author/researchers' agency (Nunn, 2014, p. 27). The latter school of thought encourages the view that professional authors should be aware of possible transitivity choices and should then select the most appropriate choice for their ongoing argumentation. This would not therefore exclude per se the use of "I", "my", "me", "we", "our" and "us". Discussions of self-representation in academic writing also refer to authors' need to display confidence (Hyland, 2002), which can be achieved with the use of first person pronouns (Ivanic, 1995; Kuo, 1999). Our detailed textual argumentation analysis of students research project reports (Nunn, 2014) also led us to conclude that second-language students are able express their "empowerment as active agents in their own learning process" (p. 20) through their use of a first-person voice, in their discussion of their own research results in particular.

Uses of inclusive and exclusive functions of the pronoun "we" are at the heart of our analysis. Inclusive "we" represents an attempt by the author to form some kind of association with his/her audience. Its function may be rhetorical or collaborative. Kuhi, Tofigh and Mabaie's (2013) analysis of the literature presents three main functions of the inclusive first person plural pronoun:

- a) creating audience involvement by indicating that the argument of the text is being built up by a collaborative writer/reader effort ... b) ensuring the reader to feel that they are part of "*joint enterprise*"... c) constructing dialogism between writers and the audience by making the discourse reciprocal. (p. 37)

We interpret this to mean that that an inclusive use of "we" serves to convey the message that what is being discussed is shared in an academic community, and therefore expresses solidarity with other scholars in a given field. It can also be used to expresses truths of more universal application as in the example, "We need oxygen to survive". One example of the inclusive use of the first person plural subject pronoun in our data can be seen in the extract below:

- (1) We perform speech acts when we offer an apology, greeting, complaint, invitation, compliment, or refusal. (Text 1)

Exclusive "we", on the other hand, helps authors express their authorial voice as the researchers of the article and underlines their contribution to their academic community (Kuhi, Tofigh, & Mabaie, 2013). Harwood (in Guo, 2012a) states that the inclusive "we" can also function as an organization marker as in the example of "as we can see in Figure 1". Authors might also choose to use "we" in the Methodology section to promote themselves to show their critical role in deciding their innovative research processes, and show their authority in making claims and expressing their unique

interpretation of data in Discussion and Conclusion sections, where they can also use this pronoun to dispute claims made by other researchers and make a name for themselves (Guo, 2012a). Likewise, Nunn (2014) also observes the strategic use of the first person pronoun in academic articles to indicate authors' original contribution to the field or intellectual ownership of any design they have developed.

The trend towards the use of "we" in academic discourse is further seen in the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA) (2010), which states:

Inappropriately or illogically attributing action in an effort to be objective can be misleading...To avoid ambiguity, use a personal pronoun rather than the third person when describing steps taken in your experiment.

*Correct:*

We reviewed the literature.

*Incorrect:*

The authors reviewed the literature. (p. 69)

Although this warning in the manual refers explicitly to the methodology section of a manuscript, we see it as a promising development for encouraging authorial voice and a potential trigger for arguments on how objectivity could be achieved. Similar instructions are given in *Science* and *Nature* journal submission guidelines, as we illustrate from Nunn (2014).

It is also important to note that the manual encourages authors to use "we" when they are referring to themselves *and* their co-authors, and allows for inclusive we:

For clarity, restrict your use of *we* to refer only to yourself and your co-author (use *I* if you are the sole author of the paper). Some alternative to *we* to consider are people, humans, researchers, psychologists, nurses, and so on. *We* is an appropriate and useful referent:

*Correct:*

As behaviorists, we tend to dispute . . . . (pp. 69-70).

The extracts from the manual above show that authors required to conform to APA rules now have some flexibility in selecting the first person pronouns "we" and "I" despite certain restrictions. We regard this as a positive development providing authors with certain level of freedom to make appropriate choices from a less restricted repertoire. If we define competent behaviour as the ability to make appropriate choices, restricting the potential choices can result in reduced levels of competent communication.

The limitation sometimes put on the use of the first person plural even to refer to multiple authors gave us the impetus to do some text analyses of the theses written in the local context of the Middle East Technical University where we noticed several researchers tended to use the pronoun in question to refer to themselves as the sole researchers of their papers. Although there has been research conducted into the use of the first person plural pronoun in multiple-authored articles (Guo, 2012b; Millan, 2010; Nunn, 2014), its occurrence in single-authored articles appears to have received relatively less interest, which was another motivation for us to carry out this study.

Earlier research by Basal (2006) into journal articles in English written by native speakers of Turkish language as single authors showed that the use of “we” was more common than the use of the first person singular “I”. Similarly, Karahan (2013), who compared the use of “we” and “I” in 20 articles by Turkish authors in the Asian EFL Journal, also found that “we” was more common than “I” (44.74% and 30.25% respectively). Karahan (2013) attributed this to the possible collectivist nature of the Turkish culture. Hyland (2001), on the other hand, states that a single author’s use of “we” can help him/her reduce personal involvement. Avoiding the use of “I” may also be due to authors’ attempts not to be seen egotistical (Harwood, 2005).

Another interesting angle, in our view possibly the most rigorous angle, from which to discuss the relationship between “I” and “we” is found in the philosophical field of phenomenology. In this field, the relationship between a singular and plural first person reflection on experience is central to the field and is frequently discussed in terms of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. Phenomenologists such as Husserl, Hegel or Scheler consider and debate in some detail the extent to which a first-person singular voice is ever truly “singular” and this same debate is taken up by more recent specialists in the field. Liberman (2008, p. 350) for example, writing from a social perspective about Husserl’s philosophy, suggests that [t]he radical sense of “we,” the quantum “we” if you will, can be evaded only when our reflections remain strictly theoretical; however, as soon as we begin to address actual courses of reason in action, including scientific reason, the primacy of the “we” becomes obvious and is unavoidable”. In a broader context, Williams (1992, p.193), in relation to a discussion of Hegel, suggests that “subjectivity and freedom are social realities that cannot be adequately understood in terms of atomistic individualism.” The “self”, it is argued, is never totally free of inter-subjectivity. We (here the present authors, both individually and collectively) have earlier proposed that competence in academic literacy (Nunn, 2007, Nunn, Deveci, Mansoor, & Babu, 2014) is inevitably linked to communities of practice. “We”, as member of a community, report our own work (potentially using an “I” perspective), refer to *other’s* work (often with an impersonal perspective that may or may not be justified) and we propose “our own” or “my own” thesis in relation to what has apparently been commonly accepted by the community of practice.

## Methodology

### *Research design*

In this initial small-scale exploratory study, we adopted a descriptive research design with the aim of determining three post-graduate students' use of the first person plural in referring to themselves as the single authors of their manuscripts. We analyzed the occurrences both quantitatively and qualitatively. We believed that the former analysis would provide us with data on the frequency and distribution of the first person in different sections of the manuscripts while the latter was aimed to attempt to discover possible explanations for the way the authors frequently opted to utilize the first person plural to refer to themselves as single authors of their papers.

### *The corpus*

We chose the three theses purposefully from one particular institution (the Department of Foreign Language Education, the Middle East Technical University) in order to reflect practices adopted by the authors in the Turkish local context (see Appendix 1). One of our reasons for this orientation was because the use of the "I", "we" distinction is of personal interest to both authors. The first author of our current paper comes from this very local context and is the author of text 1. Past experiences of using the first person plural as a single author of various research and teaching articles have indicated that the academic communities he has written for have generally been reluctant to welcome this practice. The second author has previous publications on the use of the first person including an auto-analysis in Nunn (2012). This provided us both with further motivation as well as impetus to investigate the use of first person plural uses by other single authors in the same context. It is assumed that when one author also figures as the author of a text that we are analyzing, the presence of a second author external to this particular phenomenon under investigation will help mitigate the subjectivity of a phenomenological study.

With this in mind, we identified one master's thesis in addition to the one written by the first (Turkish) author of this article, both of which use first person plural forms. We also identified one doctoral dissertation that also used first person plural forms. Further investigation revealed that no single use of the first person singular could be found in the texts. We believed that the analyses of texts from the two levels of postgraduate study would enhance our understanding of the first-person use.

### *The analyses procedures*

Our corpus included all the different sections of the manuscripts except for the acknowledgements, authorship statements and reference lists. We used an online concordance software available free of charge at <http://www4.caes.hku.hk/vocabulary/concordancer.htm> to analyze our corpus. We

gathered the quantitative data by uploading each section of the theses on the software separately, which provided us with the frequency lists of the first person plural subject, object pronouns and possessive adjective. Following this, concordance analyses were undertaken to collect qualitative data expected to interpret the effect of using first person plurals. We then excluded the instances of these pronouns used to express scientific facts and universally accepted truths since the authors did not use them to refer to themselves as the single authors of their texts, which was our primary focus in this study.

### Results and Discussion

The results of the data analysis conducted to determine how frequently the authors used the first person plural pronouns in different sections of their manuscripts can be seen in Table 2 below. Table 1 assists in interpreting the frequency and distribution in relation to raw quantities in terms of word counts. The quantitative data briefly outlined below is only used as a precursor to the discussion of the qualitative data, assisting mainly in identifying what requires further qualitative explanation.

Table 1.  
*Frequency and distribution of first person plural forms*

Sub-sections	Total Number of Words		
	Text 1	Text 2	Text 3
Abstract	254	274	248
Introduction	859	2,591	421
Method	2,233	8,381	9,071
Significance of Study	525	720	191
Literature Review	4,607	5,945	11,308
Results	9,345	20,608	3,125
Discussion			7,327
Conclusion	1,705	2,304	1,220
Recommendations	1,199	1,034	550
Total	20727	41857	33463

Note: Word count and distribution (without figures and tables)

Tables 1 (above) and 2 (below) in combination indicate that the text size in terms of word count is not obviously related to the frequency of first-person use. It is rather the more advanced level text (text 3) that has a higher frequency of first-person use. The sample size is not large enough to conclude that first-person use more frequent because

the document is more advanced, but it does suggest one focus for further qualitative investigation.

Table 2.  
*Frequencies and distribution of first person plurals*

Sub-sections	Frequencies											
	Text 1 (MA)			Text 2 (MA)			Text 3 (PhD)			Total		
	we	our	us	we	our	us	we	our	us	we	our	us
Abstract	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Introduction	0	0	0	2	0	2	0	1	1	2	1	3
Method	2	1	1	3	2	0	24	13	3	29	16	4
Significance of Study	6	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	3	0
Literature Review	7	1	2	2	2	0	8	1	2	17	4	4
Results	0	0	0	24	1	1	21	17	1	45	18	2
Discussion	0	1	0	0	0	0	42	53	10	42	54	10
Conclusion	7	3	0	0	0	0	4	1	3	11	4	3
Recommendations	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	3	1	1
Total	24	9	3	31	5	3	100	87	21	155	101	27
	36 (13%)			39 (14%)			208 (73%)			283		

As indicated in Table 2, all three first person plurals are used by all three authors, with use of the subject pronoun “we” being most frequent. Out of the total number of 155 occurrences of the subject pronoun “we”, 64.5% were used by the author of text 3 (the PhD dissertation). Similarly, the possessive adjective “our” and object pronoun “us” were also used by this author more frequently (86.1% and 77.8% respectively). If we consider the quantitative difference between the texts in terms of raw quantity (word counts), proportionally there is still a large difference in relative frequency. The qualitative analysis will therefore need to determine whether the author of text 3 (a PhD author who is expected to display a more advanced level of postgraduate study and a more sophisticated level of authorship) appears to express more fully her own voice and authority in her specific field of research through her exploitation of first-person forms. Another potential reason for more frequent use may be related to the experimental nature of the research design of the dissertation investigated in this study, which is somewhat similar to research designs adopted by researchers in hard sciences where multiple authorship increases the incidence of first person plural pronouns (Guo, 2012b). Having said this, it is important to note that the other two authors of the master’s theses did also use these pronouns to express their authorship, with a higher frequency of the first person plural subject pronoun (15.5% and 20%). When the different sections of the manuscripts are considered, we see that the pronoun “we” was used in the results (29%) and discussions sections (27.2%) more frequently, as

exemplified in extracts (2) to (11) below. However, this phenomenon only applies to texts 2 and 3, as the frequency is lower in text 1. This was followed by method section with 18.8%, the literature review with 11%, and conclusion section with 7.2%. The subject pronoun appeared 6 times (4%) in the significance of the study, three times in the recommendations (1.3%) and twice in the introduction (1.5%).

The four examples from text 2 below all appear to be used to explain the author's own reflections on or interpretation of the data. At the same time all four cases appear to be an attempt to associate a personal view with a collective appreciation that associates a reader or a potential community in an interpretation that is presented as self-evident.

- (2) Based on the results we cannot state that there is a positive or negative correlation between the level of closeness and the usages of direct, indirect and adjuncts to refusals when initiating the refusals. (Text 2- Results)
- (3) we cannot observe the effect of level of closeness in her study as she did not differentiate the equal-status interlocutors based on closeness/distance level. (Text 2- Results)
- (4) we also see that there is an impact of the level of closeness (even though not statistically significant one) on the refusal strategy preferences. (Text 2- Results)
- (5) However, we cannot know for certain that this finding reflects the actual similarity due to the fact that different methodologies were used to collect data in two studies. (Text 2- Results)

In text 3, the usage is more unambiguously an "I" replacement. In (6) for example, using our knowledge that there is only one author, we recognize "we" as avoidance of "I". All these uses are similar in that the "we" always represents a single agent.

- (6) This is also what we have hypothesized for our own data, and ..... (Text 3- Results)
- (7) The intra-typological contrast that we have run on Turkish and French data revealed a surprising pattern. (Text 3- Results)
- (8) If we took that claim to be true, we would expect our English subjects to attend more to manner of motion, whereas our Turkish and French would focus more on path of motion in the current task. (Text 3- Discussion)
- (9) that is why we observe our subjects' eye-gaze patterns before they start verbalizing what they see (cf. Flecken, 2011). (Text 3- Discussion)
- (10) we were assuming that native speakers of English would use the main verbs of their sentences to give the manner information, just like the speakers of other S-languages. (Text 3- Discussion)
- (11) we were expecting to find uniform results for the three language groups in line with the universalist approach (Jackendoff, 1990, 1996). (Text 3- Discussion)



A closer examination of the subject pronoun “we” in the results section of the PhD dissertation revealed that the author also used it to present methods as in the extracts below:

- (12) We also used a Helmert contrast to analyze the three language groups in pairs.
- (13) In order to give an answer to that specific question, we will use the detailed encoding explained in section 4.1.3.5.
- (14) Of the three values calculated, we decided to use the main two in the analyses and to leave out the OtherAverage, because other sentences were only used as distractors and their ratings were not important for our purposes.
- (15) We started by taking the mean values of each column, so that we would obtain an overall manner ratio, path ratio and other ratio for each subject.
- (16) For this inquiry, we again made both a mean analysis and a variance analysis by using the Manner-Minus-Path (MMP) Ratio.
- (17) As the M-to-MP and P-to-MP ratios were complements of each other, we only used one of them in our analyses.
- (18) We calculated two ratios out of manner and path looks; namely Manner-to-Manner+Path (M-to-MP) Ratio and Path-to-Manner+Path (P-to-MP) Ratio.

The use of the first person pronoun in the extracts above illustrates the authors’ presence in taking and executing experimental decisions. Again our external knowledge allows us to identify “I” avoidance. This use of the pronoun “we” in the results section of the dissertation is related to the experimental design of the study which appears to require the author to explain her results in accordance with the different experiments she conducted. This also seems to have a determining effect on the overall organization of the results section, leading the researcher to give further details of her research design outlined in the methodology section. We believe that this gives credence to the view that researchers might mention the steps they took as a part of their methods in different parts of their manuscript to support their arguments on the strengths of their methodology yielding their research results (Harwood, 2005).

We also found that all three first person forms (we, our, us) were used in the methodology section to varying degrees across the three texts. In text 1 (19) there is an attempt to associate a reading community from the local community:

- (19) Since we find collecting data in authentic discourse highly difficult and even in our context almost impossible, a role-play was adopted. (Text 1)

However, we interpret the four examples from texts 2 and 3 below to be “I” avoidance.

- (20) There were three main reasons why “Gossip Girls” was chosen as a baseline for constructing the DCTs in this study. Firstly, we believe that it might be a

- realistic representation of American society since the writer of the novel grew up in Manhattan and attended a private girls ... (Text 2)
- (21) since the purpose of the study is to analyze the production of refusals among people with equal status, the series could enable us to obtain rich data. (Text 2)
  - (22) We used the Dell Vostro 1320 laptop computer that we used in other tasks and placed the portable eye-tracker in front of the computer screen, so that they could function together. (Text 3)
  - (23) we used again the before-mentioned software, prepared by an expert, which helped us display the stimuli on the screen and record the answers. (Text 3)

Table 1 also shows that the possessive adjective “our” was more frequently used than the subject pronoun (54 times vs 45 times) in the discussion section to draw attention to the authors’ contribution to their academic fields. It is important to note that it appears only once in the master’s theses, which may indicate another instance of the PhD candidate’s more authoritative authorship in the same field. However, all the examples below again exemplify “I” avoidance.

- (24) Unlike what Murphy and Neu (1996) found in the native English data set, the analysis of our data revealed that certain number of speakers produced “criticism” along with complaint, which is regarded as a separate speech act. (Text 1)
- (25) Hickmann (2010) who used real-life video shootings to elicit production data also found a differential semantic density effect between English and French speakers, which cannot be explained with our type of stimulus hypothesis. (Text 3)
- (26) The results of the Acceptability Judgment Task are mostly in line with the Talmyan motion event typology and with our hypotheses, as well. (Text 3)
- (27) This typological pattern which is clearly observed in our data verifies the motion event expression dichotomy proposed by Talmy (1985), as well. The data also verifies our third hypothesis. (Text 3)
- (28) The results of the main analysis and the inter-typological contrast are totally in line with our expectations, and with the motion event typology proposed by Talmy (1985). (Text 3)
- (29) The results of the Video Description Task are totally in line with the Talmyan typology and with our hypotheses. (Text 3)
- (30) Our main explanation regarding the manner-dominant results is related to the nature of the two semantic components (manner and path). (Text 3)

Many of these extracts indicate a contribution to existing knowledge in the field by the authors. Extracts 24 and 25 state that the findings in the authors’ research contradict

earlier research findings while extracts 26 to 30 confirm previous research. That is, the authors' use of the adjective pronoun "our" serves to give them a voice in their academic community, and displays their confidence (Hyland, 2002).

It is interesting to note that the authors tended to restrict their use of the first person in the introduction and recommendation sections. The relative scarcity in the introduction may be due to the authors' desire to take a neutral stance in introducing the topic to start with; however, given the authors' established voice by the end of their manuscripts one might expect to see more frequent use of the personal pronouns. We noticed that the only first person used by the first author of this study in text 1 to make recommendations was "we" and that both cases were instances of "I" avoidance:

- (31) We suggest that if native and/or non-native teachers of English resort to the data gathered from the native speakers of English in this study, they can become more aware of the sociocultural use of the . . . (Text 1)
- (32) When learning a certain speech act, we suggest that EFL learners should be made aware of the ways they realize this act in their own language. (Text 1)

On the other hand, although the author of text 3 used all three first person forms in the recommendations section, they were used to remind the readers about the methods in particular rather than introduce recommendations and all were examples of "I" avoidance:

- (33) We have taken the space between the source and the goal as the path region, and the whole body of the agent as the manner region. Next time, it may be interesting to have a comparative analysis of different manner and path regions. (Text 3)
- (34) The results of the Acceptability Judgment Task were interpreted based on the language production data in hand, which gave us useful insights. Another strategy, next time, may be to have a follow-up interview with each subject after the task to question the reasons for the low and high ratings given to certain sentences. (Text 3)
- (35) There were no fixation points at the beginning of each video clip in our eye-tracking experiments. In the upcoming studies, it will be a practical idea to have them in order to eliminate random looks mostly occurring at the beginning. (Text 3)

None of the authors utilized the first person pronouns in their abstracts, which is a finding that contrasts with the results of a study by Guo (2012b) who, in a very different context, found that first person pronouns appeared in biology research article abstracts in both Chinese and English. As this is a small sample, we may only speculate as to

whether this difference can be interpreted as a cultural difference or as an outcome of the different research fields. However, we would note that the expectation would rather be the reverse in the latter case. Foreign language teaching as a soft science may tolerate more frequent first person use than biology as a hard science.

Our analysis of the first person plural subject pronoun also revealed that the authors used it as an organization marker in the results section in particular:

- (36) When we look through the percentages of the statement of positive feeling/opinion used in first positions by lovers, close friends and acquaintances, we see that they utilized it 3 times less than classmate... (Text 2)
- (37) When we go through the percentages of the semantic formulae utilized by each group of participants, we see that the level of closeness between the interlocutors have an important control over their semantic. (Text 3)
- (38) In this section, we will look for answers to our Research Question 1 and Research Question 2 (see section 4.1.2) regarding the applicability of the Talmyan motion event typology on our experimental data. (Text 3)
- (39) In the main analysis section, we have looked for answers to our first two research questions, inquiring the compatibility of our subjects' verbal descriptions with the theoretical motion event typology of Talmy. (Text 3)

These extracts show that the authors use the pronoun “we” with its inclusive meaning that “includes both speaker-writer and hearer-reader” (Kuhi, Tofigh, & Mabaie, 2013, p. 36). Extracts 36 and 37 act as directives asking the readers to look at a certain part of the text to make sense of the author's explanation of results, whereas extracts 38 serves as an organization marker informing the readers about what to expect next. Extract 39, on the other hand, aims to recall what has been done so far so as to prepare the readers for the subsequent sections/chapters.

Another major use of the first person plural pronoun we identified was related to the inclusive use of “we” to establish joint ownership by both the author and readers. We found that this use of the pronoun appeared in the literature review more frequently than in any other sections, which would be expected as the literature is equally available to either and neither can claim direct personal ownership of it. Some examples are:

- (41) She accepts that these figures do tell us something meaningful about pragmatic transfer, but cautions us that we need to employ procedures which allow us to make claims with reasonable confidence. (Text 1)
- (42) Because of the face-threatening nature of complaints, people may decide to either perform this act or opt out bearing in mind the social consequences.

Therefore, we can say that such a decision is a social one before it is a linguistic one. (Text 2)

- (43) In line with these definitions of pragmatics, we can say that appropriate production and interpretation of speech acts play a significant role in interactions and interpersonal relationship. (Text 2)
- (44) we need to carry out studies on refusals by focusing on a single status with different level of closeness (e.g., the refusals between people with equal status as in the current study). (Text 2)
- (45) Soroli and Hickmann (2010) also argue that language has a partial effect on our conceptual representations, as language serves as a filter channeling the incoming information (p. 582). But how can we define this partial effect? Or what are those certain circumstances that lead to language-specific representations? (Text 3)

As can be seen in the extracts above, the authors tend to use the first person plural for “bringing the readers and themselves together” (Basal, 2006), and signals “an inclusion of fellow researchers in the research process” (Munoz, 2013). Taken together, such an approach serves to establish common grounds of understanding and create solidarity with the readers.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this paper we have analyzed and interpreted what appears to be an unusual phenomenon: the use of a third person plural voice by single authors, one of whom is a co-author of this paper. We have provided overwhelming evidence that the first-person singular voice was avoided by the authors of all three theses analyzed, particularly by the author of the more advanced PhD thesis (text 3), given that there was frequent use of the plural form and not a single use of the singular “I” in any of the papers. While there may be a cultural explanation, we feel that our sample size is too small to pursue this cultural interpretation here.

In an auto-ethnographic comment, the first author of this paper reports that he has experienced recommendations of first person plural pronoun avoidance in reviews of his single-authored papers submitted for potential publications. “Coming from the local context of the Middle Technical University, I have been surprised by these comments from reviewers in contexts different from my own.” Retrospectively, we now feel that his reluctance to use first person singular to refer to himself as a single author may have been caused by his Turkish culture which does allow the use of first person plural pronoun “biz” (we) to show formality. The use of “biz” to refer to a single person can also help achieve authorial voice in Turkish, which is commonly observed in Turkish journal articles. It is also interesting to note that this pronoun can be used to express boasting in colloquial Turkish, which is obviously not an intended use in academic

writing. We feel that the first author's extensive experience of reading Turkish publications as well as English ones written by Turkish native speakers may have encouraged him to transfer this pragmatic use of first person plural pronoun to his interlanguage when writing in English.

Nonetheless, in our view possibly the most relevant (and rigorous) angle, from which to discuss the complex relationship between "I" and "we" is found in the philosophical field of phenomenology. The relationship between subjectivity, inter-subjectivity, objectivity and objectification allows us to consider whether a first-person singular voice expressed in the context of an academic community can ever be purely singular.

The single apprentice authors referred to in this paper may have been reluctant to propose a new position as exclusively "my own" and therefore preferred to include the community in "our own" thesis. However, the interplay of voices in academic discourse can also be seen as a higher order skill in that skilled authors are able to reflect the subtle interplay between multiple voices in their own writing. From the perspective of clarity and transparency of communication, as linguists we are also aware that making appropriate choices in context does need to consider deictic reference. When a single author/researcher chooses the first person as single agent or as an interpreter of findings, "I" is a definite candidate as the most appropriate form in some contexts. Disguising personal agency, whether by using an impersonal form or a more collective "we" is potentially misleading for the reader and we are against any deliberate obfuscation by an academic author. While fully respecting an author's freedom of choice, all authors - even apprentice authors - need to seriously consider the full range of choices available. In the case of self-reference, "I" is one obviously available choice for a single author. We do not believe that there was any deliberate disguise intended in the three texts that constituted our data. However, viewed in this light, all single authors may need to consider whether systematically avoiding a first person singular voice is not only self-limiting but also academically dubious if the result (and especially if the aim) is disguised agency.

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Williams, R. (1992). *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other*. New York: Suny Press.

### Appendix 1: Corpus Contents

Theses	Coding
Deveci, T. (2003). <i>A study on the use of complaints in the interlanguage of Turkish EFL learners</i> . Unpublished master's thesis. Middle East Technical University, Ankara.	Text 1
Sahin, S. (2011). <i>American English, Turkish and interlanguage refusals: A cross-cultural communication and interlanguage pragmatics study</i> . Unpublished master's thesis. Middle East Technical University, Ankara.	Text 2
Toplu, A. B. (2011). <i>Linguistic expression and conceptual representation of motion events in Turkish, English and French: An experimental study</i> . Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Middle East Technical University, Ankara.	Text 3

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## **A Study of Self-representation of Asian EFL Students through Speaking English at an Australia University**

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### **Abstract**

Drawing on literature on Asian international students and Miller (2003)'s socio-cultural theory of self-representation as a conceptual tool, this article reports the findings of a qualitative research with five Asian international students coming from an EFL context who participated in a critical pedagogical unit *Language, Society and Cultural Difference* in the TESOL Masters in Education course at an Australian university. The research is designed to explore their moving towards self-representation through speaking English in this class. The findings demonstrated that the participants had different ways of representing themselves through participation and interaction. Except for one participant who viewed herself as the inferior Other, others came to look at themselves as equal to local Australian classmates. The findings, on the one hand, challenge the stereotypes associated with Asian EFL students who are considered the Other, passive and uncritical. On the other hand, they suggest that if language learners want to represent themselves successfully through speaking English, communicative competence is not sufficient but should be combined with making use of their own cultural capital, being audible to the mainstream hearers as well as legitimizing themselves as a speaker of English.

**Keywords:** Asian EFL learners, self-representation, communicative competence, cultural capital, legitimacy

### **Introduction**

Stories and experiences of Asian international students looking at themselves in relation to studying and speaking English in English speaking countries have been comprehensively highlighted in the literature. However, the assumptions that the “West is the world” and English belongs to native English-speaking countries have marginalized international students in general and Asian EFL ones in particular, resulting in their images as the so-called Other – the Other that the Self has already known and constructed (Pennycook, 1998; Said, 1995). Relatively little attention, however, has been given to the specific exploration of the voices of Asian international students from the EFL context to clarify whether they represent themselves as the

inferior Other or not. This article responds to this concern and the presence of several empirical studies on the self-representation of Asian EFL students studying English in Australia.

In 2011, I took a critical pedagogical unit *Language, Society and Cultural Difference* which is a compulsory subject in the Master courses of Education (TESOL) at an Australian university. The distinctive features of this unit are that issues of English language teaching and learning (pedagogy, identity of learners and teachers, English as an international language, English language teaching and policy) are discussed through the lens of particular cultural, political and social contexts. Studying this unit, students are expected to strongly raise their own voices in terms of these above-mentioned issues, represent their legitimate status as speakers and teachers of English with their own power and capability as well as have critical views on English language learning and teaching in relation to cultural, political and social aspects. Half of the students in this class come from such Asian EFL countries as mainland China, Vietnam, Thailand, Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong while the rest are Australian.

Drawing on literature on Asian international students and Miller (2003)'s arguments of self-representation as a conceptual tool, this article reports the findings of a qualitative research with five Asian EFL students participating in the above-mentioned unit. The research is designed to explore their moving towards self-representation through speaking English in this class. The findings demonstrated that the participants had different ways of representing themselves through participation and interaction in the class. Some of them could change from silent learners to active ones or participate actively in class right at the beginning by achieving communicative competence, accessing communicative events and making use of their own cultural capital. Except for one participant who viewed herself as the inferior Other, others came to look at themselves as equally as local Australian classmates. The findings also challenged the stereotype of Asian EFL students as the inferior Other that was embedded in ELT.

Throughout this paper, I employ the terms like Asia, Asian, Other, Self, the West and Westerner with full awareness of the connotations and limitations that have been attached to them (Pennycook, 1998; Phan, 2008). However, they are employed simply because they are widely used in the literature.

### **Asian EFL students in English speaking countries: representations from different angles**

The images of Asian EFL students studying in English speaking countries have been associated with many stereotypes due to their Asian origins and their use of English. Pennycook (1998) and Phan (2004) shows that the status of Asian students in ELT is bound with the image of the Other who is inferior, backward and has a closed mind. Pennycook (1998) further points out that the image is the cultural product of

colonialism, which has been formed through ELT and has shaped the language and associated pedagogy.

Several stereotypes of the Other Asian EFL students have been repeated often in the professional literature, conference presentations and personal conversations such as their inactiveness in participation and purported lack of critical thinking (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Their imputed passivity in class has drawn attention from a number of scholars (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Novera, 2004; Swoden, 2005; Wen & Clément, 2003). This has been traced to their lack of linguistic competency of English, low self-confidence and their own cultural values. For instance, discussing the unwillingness of communication of Chinese students in ESL class, Wen and Clément pointed out an aspect deeply rooted in their Chinese culture, which was “an other-directed self” (p. 19). Regarding this point, they further explained that keeping silent in class was one way to protect the face of the self - students in front of public. Besides their inactiveness in participation, these students’ purported lack of critical thinking is also blamed on their own cultural attributes, which are more concerned with submission to what is delivered by teachers than with stimulation of creativity (Wen & Clément, 2003).

The above-mentioned discussions are images of Asian EFL students represented by scholars. What does research say about the voices and representation of Asian international students from EFL countries themselves? Once again, what is seen in literature is more negative than positive. Based on a study with international education students at a university in Australia regarding principles to engage in respectful communication in multicultural contexts, Viete and Peeler (2007) showed that these students felt “excluded, ignored, isolated, marginalized, or simply distanced” in class (p. 309).

The feeling of being marginalized and excluded is also mentioned in other research (Pavlenko, 2003; Phan, 2009; Takeda, 2005; Tian, 2004). Phan (2009), for instance, conducted a study with an Indonesian student in relation to voices, identity and English academic writing in Australia. This student reported that he rarely had the chance to share his opinions because his local classmates just continuously talked. He further showed the discrimination given to international students by narrating what his tutor told him:

I [the tutor] know you are not from Australia, so you need to talk more in class. This is the culture you need to learn. And by talking, your English can improve.  
(Phan, 2009, p. 144)

However, several studies shed new light on the issues of self-representation of Asian EFL students in English speaking countries. Lee and Rice (2007) contended that such images of international students as passive and lacking creativity were caused as much

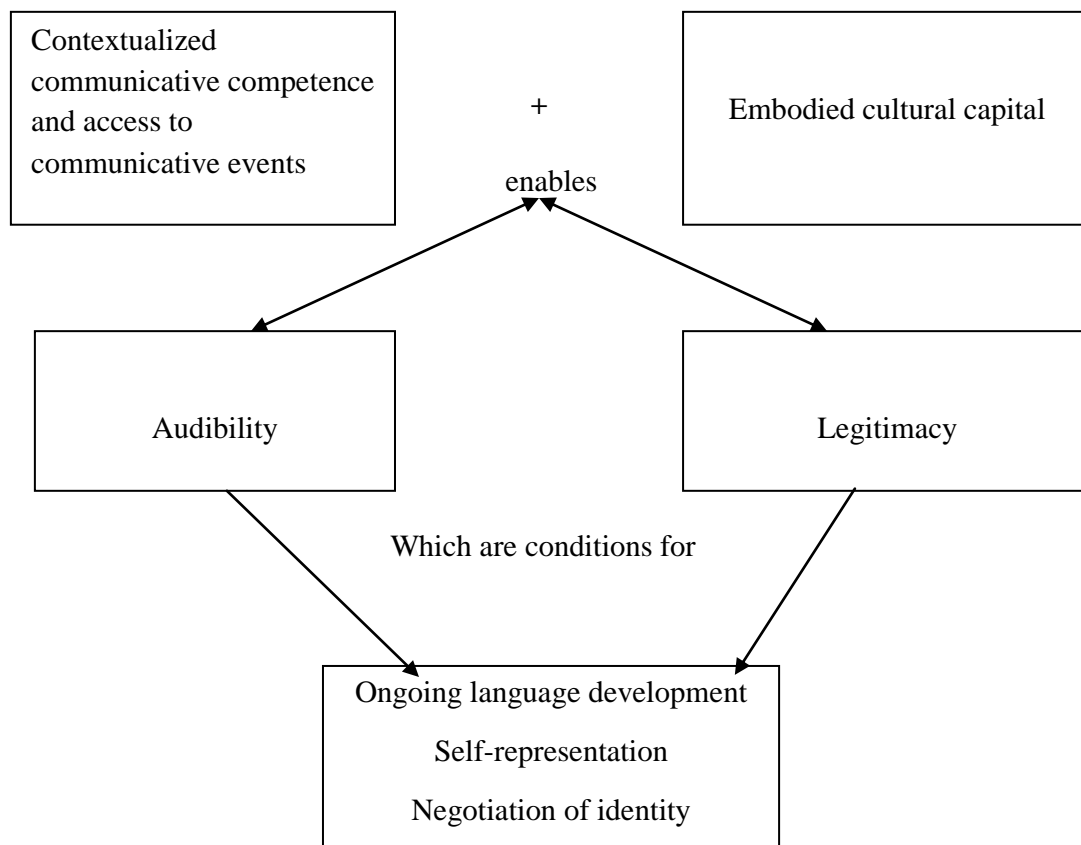
by different forms of discrimination and racism that were practiced against them. In the same vein, Gu and Schweishfurth (2006) also problematised the assumption about the Chinese EFL students in the UK and their problem of adjustment. The key issues of concern raised in these two studies again pointed to those of language and Asian Other identities.

The present paper further investigates how Asian EFL students represent themselves through interaction in one critical pedagogical unit in the Master course of TESOL at an Australian university. The findings, surprisingly, contest the stereotypifications of Asian international students and show how complex the process of their moving towards self-representation through speaking English and participation is.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework used in this research is largely grounded on Miller's (2003) argument of the move towards self-representation and the role of language, particularly speaking, in this process. According to Miller (2003), language is "a form of self-representation, which implicates social identities, the values which attach to particular written and spoken texts, and therefore the link between discourse and power in any social context" (p. 3). During the process of language learners' self-representation, the role of social interactions and contexts is crucial (Norton & Toohey, 2001; Sharkey & Layzer, 2000). If language learners are provided with diverse opportunities for learning and practising inside and especially outside formal classroom contexts, the processes of language acquisition and self-representation will be more successful. On the other hand, the more isolated language learners are from the dominant language group, the more difficult the processes must be.

Miller (2003) further adds that speaking is crucial for and directly related to issues of self-representation, social interaction and identity, as well as working as the primary means for adapting to new cultural and social settings. Based on her study of immigrant high school language learners and their social identity, Miller suggests that the process of moving towards self-representation through speaking English is as shown in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* The process of moving towards self-representation through speaking English

The first level of the diagram shows that the move towards self-representation begins with the acquisition of communicative competence in speaking which includes the combination of linguistic, phonological, discourse and sociocultural knowledge. In this process, if language learners are able to access communicative events through the target language in social interaction, the improvement of their communicative competence can be achieved. Communicative events are viewed as essential factors for learners to practice, learn and acquire the new language, and are produced by the “community of practice” and “human agency” (Norton & Toohey, 2001, pp. 311-317). “Community of practice” refers to “a set of relations among people, activity and the world” as a way to theorize and investigate social contexts (Laver & Wenger, 1991, p. 98, as cited in Norton & Toohey, 2001, p. 311). “Human agency” in language learning indicates how learners make use of intellectual and social resources to gain access to

peers for language learning and social affiliation (Norton & Toohey, 2001, p. 317). In addition to communicative competence and access to communicative events, the existence of cultural capital should be prioritized. This is grounded on Bourdieu's (1991) concept referring to "knowledge, skills and other cultural acquisitions, as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications" (p. 14).

The second level of the diagram depicts how two elements, "audibility" and "legitimacy", are concerned with the hearer and interaction between the speaker and the hearer. If the speaker gains both communicative competence and cultural capital and access to communicative events, he or she makes himself or herself understood and audible to the hearer, resulting in his or her legitimate position as a speaker of English. Finally, the diagram defines "audibility" and "legitimacy" as the conditions to uncover the possibility of language development, self-representation, and identity negotiation. Linked to this notion is agency, which indicates "the self as agent who is able to speak and act in the interest of self" (Miller, 2003, p. 175).

### **The study**

The study adopted a qualitative case study approach, and had five cases that were Asian postgraduate students coming from EFL countries including mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. At the time of the study, they were still doing a Masters Course (Master of Education – TESOL International) at an Australian university. While some of them had very little or no teaching experience, the experience of others ranged from two to seven years. Their given pseudonyms are in turn Jing, Ping, Takumi, Sunny and Lam.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and guided reflective writing. Before the interviews were undertaken, the participants were asked to produce their reflective writing based on their experiences in English speaking and teaching in relation to concepts and issues discussed in the unit *Language, Society and Cultural Difference* (see Appendix 1 for the guided question for reflective writing). I chose reflective writing as a tool for data collection because it is described as a means by which students are enabled to connect the knowledge, concepts and ideas that they acquire from the course to their past and present experiences, thoughts, work, and self-reflections or to other books, articles and courses (Hettich, 1976, as cited in Moon, 2006). In addition, the semi-structured interviews allowed me to acquire comprehensive and systematic data while the tone of the interviews still remained quite conversational and informal (see Appendix 2 for a list of the interview questions).

I chose thematic analysis as the main tool to analyze the data. I adopted five main phases in thematic analysis that Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) suggest including: "familiarizing yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes". As the coding process was completed, four main themes were emerged.

## Findings

### *Jing and Lam: changing from silent learners to active contributors*

Both Jing and Lam reported that they were quite silent for the first few weeks of the class. For Jing, this was because he came from an EFL context, while half of his classmates were Australian. Also, he could not socialize with his classmates and understand what they discussed, resulting in his feeling of being “frustrated”, uncomfortable and overlooked.

... although some of them [his classmates] are Asian, but I came from an EFL country ... so be honest, for first 3 or 4 week, I was so frustrated ... because I really felt I was ignored all the time. Just like ... when people were laughing at certain jokes and I didn't get it, and when we had discussions, I just felt like I was distracted ... or I missed the points, I really missed the points, sometimes when they asked something, I answer wrong because I misunderstood the question, and sometimes ... I just felt isolated, just because I cannot find any Taiwanese in the class and because ...although my English is OK in Taiwan, I felt like ... I had the worst English proficiency. So it made me feel so frustrated whenever I participated in the unit.

(Jing's interview)

Then he started to move on as time went by due to the comfortable environment of the class and his expansion to social interaction. Through the interview, Jing revealed he had become gradually more participatory because “they [classmates] treat me very well” and “I met more foreigners ... so I pushed myself to speak English more”. Also, he initiated a particular strategy of raising his voice in the class in which he no longer cared much about his English competency, even though he might not make himself understood by others. Moreover, he emphasized the role of the lecturer as the motivating agent making everyone get engaged in discussions.

... actually, I didn't care anymore like even others cannot hear, I don't care. That's the first case, I allow myself to talk more. The other case ... I think ... lecturer encourages us to talk and to do more critical thinking. She encourages us to talk based on our reflections, not only based on reader [reading lists] or may be just ... read book. She didn't want us to do that. So in my case, I can connect to my learning and teaching experience (Jing's interview)

For Lam, the problem of her silence was derived from the unit itself as she said in the conversation with the researcher.

Actually, for the first three or four week, I couldn't get involved much in the class because you know ... there were so many theories and linguistic concepts in this unit and ... I couldn't understand much. I was very silent ... I really did not raise my voice much (laughing)

Unlike Jing, Lam was more interested in the unit because of a memorable incident happening to her after a few sessions.

... It's was about session 4 or 5, I don't remember exactly, and the lecturer raised a question about English language teaching in different contexts. I felt like ... at that moment, I knew the answer, like ... I have my own argument for that answer... so I don't know why and started to talk and well ... my idea was appreciated. I was so happy actually because you know I am not always confident of my English... and I think after that incident, I started to raise my voice quite a lot in the class. (Lam's interview)

Obviously, this incident played as a catalyst for her to move on in the process of participation speaking English.

***Takumi: always being active and trying to be like the Self***

Takumi was very active even at the beginning of the class. Sharing the same perspective with the two participants reported above, he regarded the encouragement of classmates and lecturer as valuable contributors to his activeness. Unlike Jing, through the interview, Takumi said that he did not have any difficulties in socializing with classmates at the beginning. By following three effective strategies, he felt he had been enabled to make friends easily, practice English more and get involved in the class enthusiastically. Firstly, he preferred changing position in each session rather than sitting quietly in the same place.

... it [changing position] works a lot. I get a lot of friends, seriously ... and everybody spoke to me every time. Nobody discriminated me. Even the local students ask me for assignments. They don't discriminate me at all ... they don't regard me as Other or something like that. They treated me equally like them.

Secondly, he chose to dress in a very unique fashion style, which he regarded as "American teenager style".

[I] ... just try to make friends as much as possible by wearing this [style of clothes] because nobody can forget my fashion style even though they don't know my name



they can imagine like ... “ah I know that weird guy who wear hat and sunglasses” or “oh I know him even though I don’t know his name”.

Thirdly, outside the classroom context, he would prefer to spend time with many international friends and teach them how to learn Japanese.

Two of my friends, they are really interested in Japanese culture. They are learning Japanese language right now ... so they know I am struggling with second language and at the same time they are struggling with the second language which is Japanese, so ... that’s why they ask me how to practice English.

Besides participating actively in the class, Takumi always made an effort to speak English with an American accent because, according to him, “If I can speak English like the way American speaks, so in some ways, I can be regarded as like ... native speaker of English with American accent”. At the same time, he expected everyone to look at him as a “native American” through his accent.

***Sunny: always trying to speak out as a Korean learner***

Like Takumi, Sunny also expressed her special interest in the unit right from the first session of the class. According to Sunny, the unit helped her to address “all the problems, all the worries” that she faced in relation to ELT in Korea. Also, like all of the afore-mentioned participants, the most influential factors that motivated Sunny to present her viewpoints in front of everybody were the students and lecturer’s cooperation and encouragement.

Before I took the class, I assumed that no one would show interest in the stories of Korea, because Korea was not a big country like China and not a wealthy country like Japan. However, my classmates and lecturer listened to my story and I really enjoyed that feeling. Furthermore, I liked the opportunities to hear various stories from the classmates from other countries. Through these opportunities, I learned that every country had its own story, which was just different, and therefore, which was neither inferior nor superior. (Sunny’s writing)

Furthermore, as she reported in her individual interview, Sunny had a very positive attitude towards her English competency, even though she might sometimes fail in communication.

... I gradually try to console myself that it may not be my problem, but may be his or her problem that she/ he cannot understand my English [with Korean accent] (laughing).

This, together with her English language teaching experience and her interest in language teaching contexts in other countries, contributed to her activeness in all the discussions of the class.

I also have experience of teaching English, and ... so I have many things to talk about, that's why I participate in classroom discussion actively, and I think that ... it was good opportunity for me to hear different stories from countries. (Sunny's interview)

***Ping: regarding herself as the Other***

In contrast with 4 other participants, Ping, most of the time, resisted participation in the class except for some group discussions. In the first conversation with the researcher, Ping thought that it was the abstract knowledge of the unit itself preventing her from raising her voice in the discussions initiated by the lecturer or classmates.

I don't think I am an active student because this unit is quite difficult for me. It ... is related to so many things like culture, language and some philosophy (laughing) and ... some theories are so abstract, and I didn't understand them very well. When I do some group work, I try to explain my ideas but in the whole class I ... don't think I am active to explain what I am thinking.

This problem was also partially related to her English competence because she did not "have exact words or sentences to explain in English" as she revealed in the interview. To further clarify her problem, she narrated one incident that occurred in the class as she was discussing a reading with her lecturer.

I always sat next to a Chinese girl and we ... most of the time talk in Chinese, of course not in group discussions (laughing). One day, I asked the lecturer something about one issue in the reader [one article in the reading lists] ... and then what lecturer said, I didn't understand ... so I turn to the Chinese friend, talk to her in Chinese to ask her like ... what the lecturer mean. I was really ashamed at that time and I feel like ... I am rude but I couldn't understand so I need help. (Ping's interview)

Thus, she concluded that she was "just the Other" – an English language learner who was unable to converse easily and fluently in English and "just a non-native English speaker" (Ping's writing), resulting in her limited opportunity to speak out in the class.

## Discussion

### *Reasons behind different ways of self-representation*

Given the above findings, some questions should be raised regarding the reasons why some participants felt enabled to speak out all the time (Takumi, Sunny) or change their attitude towards participation and interaction (Jing, Lam) whereas the other (Ping) was unable to regard herself as equal to her classmates and to speak out in the class. More importantly, these questions need to be clarified, as all participants acknowledged that the class atmosphere was very positive due to the friendliness, encouragement and support from students and their lecturers. Miller's (2003) argument of moving towards self-representation through speaking English is a useful conceptual tool for me to explain all these questions.

Firstly, as Miller (2003) argues, in order to move towards self-representation successfully, the first level that language learners need is to achieve communicative competence and have access to communicative events. In terms of communicative competence, two participants implicitly acknowledged they had quite good levels of English including Takumi (local students ask me for assignments) and Sunny (It may not be my problem, but may be his or her problem that she/ he cannot understand my English). Two other participants had been attempting to improve their communicative competence by gradually speaking out more in class though they were not always "confident" with their English (Lam) or felt "frustrated" when getting lost (Jing).

Concerning communicative events, except for Ping, all four participants were able to take part in communicative interaction both inside and outside the class frequently, which is produced through engagement in the "community of practice" and "human agency" (Norton & Toohey, 2001). As explained earlier, "community of practice" refers to "a set of relations among people, activity and the world" as a way to theorize and investigate social contexts (Laver & Wenger, 1991, p. 98, as cited in Norton & Toohey, 2001, p. 311). There are several communities of practice in which the participants get involved in speaking English, including formal and informal classroom contexts, and social interactions in which these students participate outside study. Regarding the first community of practice in class, Jing gradually pushed himself to speak English more and started to overlook whether other people could understand what he said. Lam gained motivation from a particular incident in which her own idea was highly appreciated by the lecturer and gradually gained access to communicative activities in class successfully. Takumi tried to seek opportunities to speak English to other students by changing his seating every week. Sunny got involved in class discussions as she was interested in telling the "stories" of Korean situations concerning ELT and listening to her classmates' stories. With respect to the second community of practice, which consisted of social contacts outside class, some participants revealed how they came to participate in them. Jing met more "foreigners" and knew "few Chinese and Taiwanese

in the first semester” while Takumi spent most of his time socializing with international friends. This enabled them to expand their multicultural friend network and seek more opportunities to speak English.

Besides “community of practice”, “human agency” can serve as a contributory factor to gain access to communicative events. “Human agency” in language learning, as argued by Norton and Toohey (2001, p. 317), is the way learners of English take advantages of their intellectual and social resources to gain access to peers for language learning and social affiliation. In other words, it employs what Miller (2003) calls “embodied cultural capital” (p. 171). Several participants were able to acquire cultural capital through different means. Jing and Sunny connected the theories and concepts in the unit with their teaching experience, resulting in facilitating their process of participation and understanding abstract knowledge. Takumi took advantage of his unique fashion style and Japanese (his mother tongue, which seems to be valued cultural capital) as a purposive way to make friends and practice English inside and outside the classroom environment.

In contrast with the four participants, communicative competence may be a quite big challenge for Ping, who sometimes felt unable to express her ideas in English properly, as she reported. Moreover, Ping was unable to gain access to communicative events because she was always isolated from the dominant language group (sitting next to a Chinese girl and talking in Chinese most of the time).

Finally, achieving communicative competence, having access to communicative events and gaining cultural capital all enabled “audibility and legitimacy, which are conditions for self-representation” (Miller, 2003, p. 176). As discussed earlier, “audibility” is how language learners make themselves audible to hearers and “legitimacy” is how they legitimize themselves as speakers of English (p. 176). Some participants like Jing and Sunny even went beyond Miller’s (2003) explanation of “audibility” to divest themselves of the worry about whether they could make themselves audible to mainstream hearers or not. Their philosophy in social interaction was that if the hearer could not understand what they said, it was the hearer’s problem, not their own.

Drawing on Miller’s argument of moving towards self-representation, it can be seen that Takumi and Sunny were able to achieve this process thoroughly right at the beginning of the class. They had communicative competence, accessed communicative events by participating in communities of practice and making use of their own cultural capital, resulting in their active contribution in the class. However, to compare their process of moving towards self-representation, I believe that Sunny’s is more complete than Takumi’s. Sunny is satisfied with her “strong Korean accent” because it is part of her identity. Takumi, in contrast, desires to represent himself as a “native American” through imitating an American accent and expecting everyone to look at him as an American. His self-representation is more complicated with both misperception and

self-awareness of his own position in relation to English speaking. The misperception can be explained as a typical way that many Japanese people view English as a “civilized” language to identify with Westerners (Kubota, 1998, p.298). In this sense, the assumption that the West is always better is not only held by Westerners but also non-Westerners in the spread of English and ELT (Pennycook, 1998).

Regarding Jing and Lam’s self-representation, though they could not move towards self-representation successfully at the beginning, they had been gradually achieving it. This was accomplished by having access to communicative events (Jing and Lam) or making use of cultural capital - teaching experience - as an effective means to integrate into the community of English and understand the conceptual tools in the unit better (Jing). The participant who struggled to move towards self-representation was Ping though she sometimes interacted in group discussions. She was not able to participate in communicative events, particularly through social contacts and taking advantage of her cultural capital. Also, her lack of confidence in her English proficiency together with her lack of professional experience might have discouraged her in the process of moving towards self-representation and simultaneously lead to her self-perception as the inferior Other.

Overall, though coming from the same context, EFL Asian countries, each participant in this study approach the self-representation process quite distinctively. Whereas Sunny is always proud of herself as a Korean identity who speaks English with Korean accent, Takumi tries to gain try more access to communities of English practice by imitating American accent and expecting everyone to look at him like an American one day. While Jing establishes the philosophy in social interaction to claim his communicative competence, which is if the hearer could not understand what he says, it is the hearer’s problem, not his, Lam gradually represents herself as who she is through a successful event of showing off her capability in the class. Ping, particularly seems to attach herself too much to the misperception that the non-native English speaker is just the inferior Other in relation to the superior self, which has been embedded in ELT.

### ***Contesting the stereotypes***

Firstly, the findings challenge some scholars’ association of Asian EFL students with such common stereotypes as their passivity in class (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Novera, 2004; Swoden, 2005; Wen & Clément, 2003) and their lack of critical thinking (Atkinson, 1997). The participants, in reality, are not passive as described. They, except for Ping, are able to “contribute something” (Jing), have an awareness of “right to speak” (Lam), “communicate with people as much as possible” (Takumi) and “actively participate in class discussion” (Sunny). That the silent participant - Ping - did not seek an opportunity to speak has nothing to do with her own Chinese culture as argued by Ballard and Clanchy (1997), Swoden (2005) and Wen and Clément (2003). This silence is more related to her self-confidence regarding her English competency and the

knowledge of the unit. Moreover, the participants were certainly not lacking in their critical thinking in academic learning. They thought critically in their own ways by connecting what they experienced as teachers of English with what they were learning (Jing) or comparing different “stories” of language teaching and learning in different contexts (Sunny).

Secondly, the findings are also contrary to other Asian EFL students who see themselves as the Other, being marginalized and excluded in other studies (Phan, 2009; Takeda, 2005; Tian, 2004; Viete & Peeler, 2007). The Asian EFL students in this study all acknowledged that the classroom atmosphere was made comfortable enough for them to enjoy the unit through aspects such as the friendliness and cooperation of students, and the encouragement of lecturers. Instead of experiencing discrimination, they were given attention from classmates and lecturers whenever they presented their perspectives. One participant - Ping - regarded herself as the Other but this originated from her internal factors rather than any pressure from the classroom environment.

Overall, on the one hand the findings of this study challenges such stereotypes associated with Asian EFL learners who are regarded as the Other, passive, non-confident and uncritical. Though the participants in this study undergo complex process of moving towards self-representation through speaking English, all of them except for Ping are aware of their legitimate position as a speaker of English with their all effort and confidence. Though their perceptions of the status as a speaker of English are probably misled sometimes like Takumi's, they generally and gradually represent themselves successfully as who they really are. On the other hand, this study throws new light on how to help language learners to move towards self-representation through speaking English. Undertaking this process, language learners need a wide range of factors including gaining communicative competence, accomplishing legitimacy as a speaker of English and being audible to mainstream hearers. Communicative competence which has been normally associated with linguistic proficiency is no longer valid in this study. It also depends on how capable language learners are to gain access to communities of English practice and to maximally exploit their own cultural capital for effective communication. In addition to communicative competence, establishing legitimacy and making oneself audible to English hearers all simultaneously constitute success of English communication, leading to the completion of the process of self-representation.

### **Implications**

This study offers new directions for TESOL education programs and for how to empower international TESOL students, particularly those coming from EFL context to represent themselves successfully through speaking English. Firstly, the importance of creating a wide range of communities of English practice should be prioritized in teaching English speaking. As suggested by Miller (2003), communicative competence

is crucial for self-representation and achieved by accessing communities of practice which need to be developed through both inside and outside language classroom environment. Regarding the first one, the role of teachers is essential. Organizing such communicative activities through group work discussions is a good option that teachers can consider. I suggest speaking tasks in relation to working in groups rather than in pairs or individually because this can encourage those who are unwilling to communicate for the sake of losing face in front of other learners or lacking appropriate language competency.

Regarding the creation of communities of practice outside classroom environment, this depends enormously on the factor of “human agency” as suggested by Norton & Toohey (2001, p.311 - 317). In other words, it is the way how language learners can take advantage of their own cultural capital to participate in process of English communication in social contexts. One kind of cultural capital that I believe all language learners can exploit is their own linguistic, cultural and social backgrounds. These are all symbolic resources which play as lever for language learners to communicate and share with those coming from another country. However, as the level of knowledge regarding social, linguistic and cultural acquisitions varies among Asian EFL students, their achievements through English communication process can also be different. Therefore, what the teachers need to do is to help students exploit their available resources of cultural capital so that they can empower themselves as speakers of English through interaction.

In addition to producing communities of practice, making international TESOL students audible/ heard with mainstream hearers of English should be encouraged. On the one hand, being audible depends on the language competency of learners. Specifically, it is the learner’s acquisition of communicative competence which includes the combination of linguistic, phonological, discourse and sociocultural knowledge to facilitate themselves in interaction process (Miller, 2003). On the other hand, it is expected that international students can go beyond what is considered as the normal meaning of audibility in communication. In other words, I believe that all language learners should and can learn the participants’ philosophy in this study, which is if the hearer could not understand what they say, it is the hearer’s problem, not their own. Once they apply this principle successfully, they will divest themselves of the worry about whether they could make themselves audible to mainstream hearers or not.

In order to achieve self-representation through speaking English successfully, international TESOL students, especially Asian EFL students should consider themselves as legitimate speakers of this language. To help them gain this, the responsibilities lie not only with student teachers themselves but also TESOL educators. First, from the perceptions of student teachers, they need to legitimize themselves as teachers and speakers of English rather than regard themselves as the Other, inferior non-native English speaking teachers. As have been shown in many studies, the non-

native English speaking teachers have been associated with many stereotypes. As many researchers point out, in language teaching they have been perceived as the Other, a knowledge transmitter, and an authoritarian teacher compared to the Self, a learning counselor, and a friend or a facilitator (e.g., Canagarajah, 1999; Higgins, 2003, Holliday, 2005; Phan, 2004; Phan, 2008; Pavlenko, 2003). According to Pennycook (1998), such stereotypes are cultural products of colonialism, which have been constructed through ELT and which shaped the language and its associated pedagogy. He also indicates that the way the images of the Self and the Other is closely connected to colonial practices positioned the Self over the inferior Other. If all native English speaking teachers of English can be fully aware of the inadequate assumptions associated with the above stereotypes, they should be aware of their legitimate positions as a teacher and speaker of English.

From the perspectives of TESOL educators, it is important to design critical pedagogical courses that refer to a combination of readings of both Western and Asian EFL academies. Also, such readings that critically analyze and point out the inappropriate assumptions of stereotypes regarding non-native English teaching teachers as Pennycook (1998) and others mention should be included in language teacher training courses. As all international TESOL students study all of these issues, I believe that they will view themselves as the owner, the legitimate speaker and teacher of English. As a result, their process of moving towards self-representation through speaking English will be no longer as challengeable as it has been.

## **Conclusion**

The accounts of five Asian international students' experiences as EFL participants in a class of Master TESOL at an Australian university show that language learners' process of moving towards self-representation through speaking English is highly complex. Miller's (2003) sociocultural theory of moving towards self-representation through language has provided my paper with an interesting framework for making sense of the process involved. The participants' stories reveal that self-representation through speaking English is experiential, participative and individual as well as social. Communicative competence is no longer sufficient to represent oneself successfully as who he or she is. It is necessary to gain access to communicative events by taking advantage of community of English practice and human agency or one's own cultural capital, which constitutes appropriate achievement of self-representation. Besides, upholding one's own legitimate status as a speaker of English rather than viewing oneself as inferior contributes to the success of self-representation through speaking English. This study, on the one hand, challenges the stereotypes associated with Asian EFL students who are viewed as the inferior, uncritical and passive Other. On the other hand, it opens up a new direction pointing that if language learners want to represent themselves successfully through speaking English, communicative competence is not



sufficient but should be combined with making use of their own cultural capital as well as legitimizing themselves as a speaker of English. This argument plays as an ideological establishment for TESOL educators to help Asian EFL learners successfully achieve self-representation through speaking English and gain access to international English communication environment.

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## **Appendix 1 – Question for reflective writing**

Please describe your experiences of English learning and teaching regarding issues and concepts that you studied in the unit *Language, Society and Cultural Difference*.

## **Appendix 2 - Interview Questions**

1. Please tell me about yourself (age, country of origin, length of studying English, educational background, and English teaching experience).
2. What is your story to pursue Master of Education (TESOL international)? What is your plan after you get your master degree?
3. How will you teach English as you finish the TESOL course?
4. Whose English do you speak? Can you explain?
5. How did you participate in interaction with peers and lecturers in the class during studying *Language, Society and Cultural Difference*?
6. Please tell me whether you think you are the owner of English or not.
7. What are reasons people still highly appreciate native English speaking teachers? What is this situation in your country? What is your opinion for that?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## **Note on Contributor**

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## **Error Gravity in a Nonnative English Speaker's Speech: The Case of Article Errors and Pluralizing Non-count Nouns**

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### **Abstract**

An empirical study was conducted to investigate the effect of article errors and pluralizing non-count nouns on the listeners' comprehension and perceptions of nonnative English speakers' speech by comparing the listeners' responses in two different conditions: first, when the nonnative speech is grammatically accurate but marked for a noticeable foreign accent; second, when the nonnative speech displays both a noticeable foreign accent and common nonnative speakers' grammatical errors in article usage and pluralizing non-count nouns such as "advice" and "information." The study analyzed the comprehension and perceptions of 104 U.S. college students, who listened to Korean, Russian, and Chinese speakers and answered questions that measured their comprehension and perceptions. The results showed that there were no statistically significant differences in the adjusted means between error groups and no error groups in comprehension and any of the perception items. Additionally, there were no statistically significant interactions between language groups and error groups in comprehension and perception items. This study has also confirmed the well-established notion that listeners tend to respond to the pronunciation. However, the strength of a speaker's accent affected only certain aspects of how the listeners perceived them, but not enough to make a difference in comprehension.

Keywords: error gravity, nonnative English, article, non-count nouns

### **Introduction**

It has long been recognized that mastering native-like attainment of the English article usage is probably one of the most difficult goals, especially for those whose first languages do not have articles in their linguistic inventories. According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), articles are not used in most Slavic, Oriental, and African languages. In addition, articles or particles that function as articles in other language groups do not have the same function and usage as the English article system. Various researchers have noted that students whose first languages lack the article systems acquire the article system later than those whose L1 includes them (Liu & Gleason, 2002; Master, 1997; McEnery, Xiao & Tono, 2006; Thomas, 1989). Ample anecdotal evidence confirms that even some of the most proficient second language speakers often

err in article usage. Despite the perennial challenges that English language learners face with article usage, language teachers are still in search of effective pedagogical techniques to teach the article system. When we consider teachability and learnability, integral concepts of psycholinguistic theories which posit developmental sequence (e.g., Krashen, 1985; Pienemann, 1989), the article system would belie the notion of acquisition order in that its mastery is virtually unattainable for many learners, especially for a rapidly growing number of nonnative speakers in the expanding circle countries whose language systems lack articles.

Scholars in World Englishes generally agree that intelligibility, rather than native-like accuracy, should be the main goal of English language teaching when English is taught as a tool for international communication. One implication of such a position is that teachers should identify the most important items to focus on in their instruction to help the English language learners develop skills to successfully communicate with speakers around the globe. For example, in the field of pronunciation, Jenkins (2000) argued that some sound distinctions (e.g., /d/ and /ð/) are not essential for international intelligibility and urged ELT professionals to identify a phonological core by taking into consideration “teachability and learnability in pronunciation teaching” (p. 2).

If there is a general consensus among ELT professionals that the principles proposed by Jenkins (2002) - teachability and learnability - along with error gravity, should guide pedagogical priorities in an English as an international context, it would be appropriate to extend this approach to the teaching of grammar as well. This article seeks to propose that researchers identify a common grammatical core by distinguishing essential and nonessential grammatical items through empirical studies. As a small step in this direction, an empirical study was recently conducted to find how two of the most common nonnative English speakers’ error types –errors in article usage and pluralizing of non-count nouns such as “information” and “advice” – would affect listeners’ understanding and perceptions of a nonnative speech.

### **A review of studies on the acquisition of articles**

Various reasons have been suggested in order to explain the apparent difficulty of acquiring the article system. Liu and Gleason (2002) pointed out “its complex usage and the difficulty involved in analyzing it” (p. 2). Others attributed the difficulty to the fact that the count-mass distinction, which underlies the article choice, is morphological and syntactical rather than ontological (See Allan, 1980; Bunt, 1985; Gathercole, 1986; Mufwene, 1984), and that there is no one-to-one form-meaning relationship (Anderson, 1984; Butler 2002). Still others have suggested factors resulting from Universal Grammar principles (Ionin, Zubizarreta, & Maldonado, 2008; Ko, Ionin, & Wexler, 2009). Bauer (2007), in her review of the development of the definite article in Indo-European languages, speculated that the existence or non-existence of the article reflects differing degrees of grammaticalization across languages. Additionally, as Thomas

(1989) pointed out, many article usages fall under idiomatic functions. Learners' difficulty can be exacerbated as grammar textbooks typically provide only general information. For example, in a survey of six widely used ESL/EFL grammar series, Yoo (2009) found out that none of the textbooks he examined offered adequate explanations for shared knowledge and situational use of the definite article usage.

Reporting results of several studies conducted on Korean learners of English, Kim and Lakshmanan (2009) pointed out learners' lack of ability to distinguish specificity (knowledge possessed by the speaker only) and definiteness (knowledge shared between the listener and the speaker) as a factor that causes errors in the definite article usage. For example, Kim and Lakshmanan (2009) observed that Korean speakers tend to rely on specificity, rather than definiteness, when using the definite article. What compounds the problem even further is the fact that little is known as to why learners make certain choices when they use or do not use articles. Findings from Robertson's (2000) and Jarvis's (2002) studies show that there is an "unsystematic variation" (Robertson, 2000, p. 135) in that learners do not always make the same article choices even in the same context.

Although the traditional focus has been on errors made by speakers of L1s which lack articles, scholars in the last decade have also tried to examine the causes of article errors among learners, whose L1s contain the article system. Research findings to date seem to partially support the L1 transfer effect. Bahaineh's (2005) study of Jordanian undergraduate EFL students' indefinite article usage found that L1 transfer was shown only in the deletion of the indefinite article whereas common developmental factors such as simplification and overgeneralization were responsible for the majority of learners' article errors. Garcia Mayo's (2008) study of Spanish EFL learners' acquisition of the definite article presented support for the L1 transfer effect. Her study further showed that although there was a significant improvement in correct article usage as the learners' proficiency level increased from elementary to low-intermediate level, no significant progress was made for learners transitioning between low-intermediate and advanced levels. In a corpus-based study of tertiary level Arabic EFL speakers, Crompton (2011) also posited the L1 transfer effect as the major source of problem.

Another common type of grammatical errors, considered in this study, involves pluralizing non-count nouns. These items may not pose the same level of challenge as articles do when we consider teachability/learnability criteria because, unlike articles, the number of these items is finite, and they can become salient through focused instruction and practice. Nevertheless, these errors commonly occur, and moreover, they share the same root problem as the article errors –mass and count distinction. Kirkpatrick (2007) reported that in other varieties of English, plural marker “-s” is often extended to nouns that appear without plurals in Standard English. For example, *luggages* and *advices* are seen in African varieties of English and *equipments*, *staffs*, and

*researches* are commonly used in Hong Kong. For many English learners and speakers of other varieties of English, it may seem illogical and even arbitrary that words, such as *information*, *advice*, and *equipment* cannot be pluralized. Examining the development of the English language throughout its turbulent history reveals a number of examples that muddle our understanding of the mass-count distinction in the English language. For example, words such as “ȝer” (year), “þing” (thing), and “wōrd” (word) had no plural endings in Middle English, as well as measure words such as “mȳle” (mile), “pound,” “score,” and “pair” (Mosse, 1979). These examples, along with many others presented in the history of the English texts, make it clear that correctness is relative to our time and usage. However, even these local errors are still clearly distinguished as typical nonnative errors and can potentially affect how the nonnative speakers who produce such errors are perceived.

### **A review of studies on error gravity**

Numerous studies have investigated how nonnative speakers’ speeches are assessed by native speakers, and especially, what factors affect intelligibility and comprehension the most. Whereas intelligibility is affected by objective elements such as clarity, lucidity, and audibility (Buranapatana & Zhang, 2008), comprehensibility involves listeners’ “subject assessment of ease or difficulty of comprehension” (Derwing, Munro, & Wiebe, 1998, p. 396). Rifkin and Roberts (1995) provided a helpful review of earlier studies on error gravity up until the early 1990s. The results of the findings are mixed, as there was not a single identifiable type of error that had been found to impede communication the most. For example, Hughes and Lascaratou’s (1982) study involved thirty judges (ten native-speaker teachers of English, ten Greek teachers of English, ten educated English native speakers who were not teachers) who rated the seriousness of grammatical errors made by Greek high school learners of English. Results showed that both groups of native speakers were more lenient than the Greek teachers and depended almost exclusively on the criterion of intelligibility. Based on the findings, Hughes and Lascaratou argued that if the goal of teaching English is the development of communicative competence, the work must be assessed based on intelligibility, rather than on rule-based accuracy.

Gynan’s (1985) study of NSs’ comprehension and attitudes toward Spanish L1 learners of English showed that comprehensibility was more related to phonological factors than morphosyntax. His study contrasted two earlier studies which considered error gravity issues. Politzer’s (1978) study identified lexical errors as the most seriously affecting comprehension, followed by morphosyntax, phonological factors playing the least role. Similar results were borne out by Dordick’s (1996) experimental study, which investigated the communicative interference effect of ESL errors on native speakers of English and found that lexical and verb-related errors proved to interfere with comprehension the most. Fayer and Krasinski’s (1987) study compared the

reactions of native English speakers and native Spanish speakers who listened to the speeches of Puerto Rican learners of English of differing proficiency levels. Results showed that among variables such as intelligibility, grammar, pronunciation, intonation, voice, and hesitations, both groups reported that pronunciation and hesitations, rather than grammar, were the most distracting features. More recently, researchers such as Field (2005) and Kennedy and Trofimovich (2008) have considered the role of other linguistic constructs such as lexical stress, the listener experience, and semantic context on the comprehension and perception of non-native speeches. Differing results are expected, albeit inconvenient, because these studies have involved different languages, modalities, and types of samples. Rifkin and Roberts (1995) encouraged researchers to use authentic learner samples, and at the same time, recognized that researchers need to “coordinate goals with their methodology” (p. 532). Despite conflicting results regarding the hierarchy of error gravity, researchers in error gravity studies widely agree that it is necessary to distinguish between those errors which are in greatest need of being pointed out and those which need less attention, and suggest that teachers focus more on those types of errors that affect comprehension the most. This seems to be particularly relevant to teaching English in an EFL context, where the ownership of the language has shifted to the users, not the “native” speakers of the language.

Although numerous studies in error gravity to date have tried to identify various factors that affect listeners’ comprehension and perception, few studies have specifically focused on the most frequent type of grammatical errors—omission of articles and pluralizing non-count nouns in a controlled experimental context. In addition, studies on error gravity have mainly examined how nonnative speakers’ speeches are perceived or understood by native speakers to determine which learner errors impede communication and which nonnative errors are perceived to be most irritating by native speakers (Rifkin & Roberts, 1995). Pedagogical priorities drawn from these studies using native speakers as sole judges would not be adequate to be applied to English as an International Language (EIL) context in that the interlocutors in EIL settings include various types of users of English “within and across Kachru’s ‘Circles,’ for intranational as well as international communication” (Seidlhofer, 2005, p. 339).

The goal of the present study is to find whether listeners’ perceptions and understanding of a nonnative speaker’s speech is affected by these local<sup>1</sup> grammatical errors, and if so, to what extent and in what ways. Unlike previous studies which have used native speakers as sole judges, the present study involves mixed-groups of listeners, including both native and nonnative speakers of English in natural classroom settings. In doing so, this study aims to contribute to the knowledge currently being shaped in the field of EIL by identifying developmental features of English which tend not to be crucial for international intelligibility and therefore need not receive the main focus in teaching English as an international language. The present study was conducted



to answer the following research question: Do nonnative English speakers' grammatical errors in article usage and plurals of non-count nouns affect college students' comprehension and perception of their speeches?

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Six groups of undergraduates, enrolled in English Composition classes at Andrews University, participated in this study. There were a total of 104 participants (51 males and 53 females) and no one reported having hearing impairment. Since these students were recruited from the general education courses, they represented various academic majors and native languages. A typical U.S. college classroom is represented by a large number of native speakers, and such a tendency characterized the composition of the groups in this study. The majority of participants (84 participants) were native English speakers and the remaining 20 students indicated various languages (European: 10, African: 4, and Asian: 6) as their first language (L1). Interviews with the classroom teachers revealed that most of the 20 L2 students had either native-like proficiency or a high level of proficiency of English. Despite the disproportionate make-up of the participants' L1s, the hybridity of this natural cohort makes these participants a suitable sample in a broad EIL context, which includes the use of English "within and across Kachru's 'Circles'" (Seidlhofer, 2005, p. 339).

Three nonnative speakers were recruited through personal contact on the campus of Andrews University in order to provide tape-recorded speech samples. All three speakers spoke first languages that do not have the article system: Korean, Russian, and Chinese. All came to the United States as adults and therefore retained a noticeable foreign accent to varying degrees. In order to exclude the gender variable, only males were chosen. The Korean speaker was a Ph.D. candidate. He was teaching a graduate course as a teaching assistant at the time of study. The Russian speaker was in his last year as a graduate student. The Chinese speaker, who had the mildest accent among the three, was a native speaker of Cantonese and was a retired professor with over 30 years of teaching experience in the U.S. The speech of a native English speaking graduate student was recorded and used for baseline/pretest data. Their identities and nationalities were not revealed to the listeners.

### ***Listening tasks***

Each group listened to two lectures – one read by a native speaker and the other by a nonnative English speaker. These two lectures were prepared, ensuring that they were comparable in length, mode, vocabulary level, discourse structure, and the conceptual depth. The first lecture, read by the native English speaker, contained 316 words and argued for using electronic medical records. The baseline/pretest data elicited from the

native speaker's speech served as the covariate. The second lecture, which contained 311 words, read by the three nonnative speakers, argued for switching to a nationwide computerized voting system. The second lecture read by three nonnative English speakers was prepared in two versions: one without any grammatical errors and the other with researcher-induced grammatical errors in article usage and pluralizing of non-count nouns (See Appendix 1). Each nonnative speaker read both the grammatically correct version and the incorrect version and these different versions were played to different groups (See Table 1 for treatment conditions). Three independent native speakers of English – one undergraduate, one graduate, and an ESL teacher – were consulted in the text preparation and finalization stage to ensure that the two lectures read by the native speaker and a nonnative speaker were comparable in all the areas mentioned above. The recorded lectures were played to randomly assigned groups of English composition classes. Each session lasted for approximately 15 minutes.

The lecture that contained errors included 11 errors in article usage and two errors in plural nouns. The 11 article errors included 10 omissions and one insertion. This was based on the previous research findings that even those subjects with a higher level of proficiency, whose L1 lacked the article system, tended to overuse the zero article (Master, 1987), and article omission or overuse of the zero article was a more common error type than a misuse of definite article among ESL learners (Liu & Gleason, 2002). There were 16 obligatory contexts in which the definite article was required, and the text included a total of five definite article omissions. Out of seven obligatory contexts for the indefinite article usage, five were omitted. There was one instance where an indefinite article was inserted when a zero article was required (a poor eyesight\*). The lecture with errors contained approximately 46% of article usage errors. Additionally, it contained two erroneous noun forms, *informations\** and *advices\**, some of the common errors made by nonnative speakers.

Care was taken to ensure that the text which contained grammatical errors was read exactly as prepared by the researcher. Practice reading was conducted two or more times to make sure that these control variables were audible and noticeable and no other grammatical errors were accidentally inserted. The final recorded speech samples contained all the target errors and no other unintended grammatical errors.

### ***Data collection***

The survey instrument contained three parts (See Appendix 2). Part 1 included questions about the participants' biographical information such as age, native language, academic major, sex, and foreign language ability. The participants filled out Part 1 before listening to the segments, and the next two parts – parts 2 and 3 – were completed immediately after the listening tasks. Part 2 contained four comprehension questions that included multiple choice and true/false items testing their understanding

of the native speaker's lecture on electronic medical records. It also included survey items that measured the listeners' perception of the native English speaker's speech on a five-point Likert scale. Part 3 included four comprehension questions of the same types as in part 2, testing students' understanding of the nonnative speaker's lecture on switching to a nationwide computerized voting system. It also included the same seven questions that measured the listener's perceptions and attitudes towards the nonnative speakers' speeches. The seven Likert items asked listeners to respond to statements, adapted from Scales, Wennerstrom, Richard, and Wu (2006), such as "The speaker speaks fluently; is easy to understand; is pleasant to listen to; sounds educated; would be a good teacher; has an annoying/irritating accent; speaks accurately." At the end of the survey, if the listeners decided that the nonnative speaker did not speak accurately, they were asked to provide short answers stating the reason(s) for their decision, and these answers were coded under three broad categories: grammar, pronunciation, and prosody.

After obtaining consent from the course teachers, participants were initially contacted via class email with general information about the research and the data collection procedure. A copy of the informed consent form was attached for them to review. Approximately one week after the email, the researcher came to classes to obtain the signatures on the consent forms from those who agreed to participate. Data were collected in the following week in the last 15 minutes of the class, so that the students who did not wish to participate could leave early.

Table 1.  
*Treatment conditions*

<b>Groups (N=104)</b>	<b>Listening Tasks</b>
Group 1 (n=20)	Korean speaker with no errors
Group 2 (n=16)	Korean speaker with errors
Group 3 (n=17)	Russian speaker with no errors
Group 4 (n=15)	Russian speaker with errors
Group 5 (n=19)	Chinese speaker with no errors
Group 6 (n=17)	Chinese speaker with errors

*Note.* Errors refer to misuse or nonuse of articles and incorrect noun plurals, *advices* and *informations*. Although idiosyncratic nonnative pronunciation and prosodic features

were present to varying degrees in all three speakers' speeches, those features were naturally occurring learner variations, not those induced by the researcher.

### ***Data analysis***

Green and Salkind (2008) discuss the use analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) for empirical data analysis in which “(1) all cases are measured initially on a pretest, (2) cases are randomly assigned to different groups, (3) groups receive different treatments, and (4) all cases are subsequently measured on a posttest” (p. 211). Satisfying all four conditions, the study utilized two-way ANCOVA. Pretest comprehension and perception data was used as the covariate for the ANCOVA procedure which was used to determine group differences in the posttest. The two independent variables were language (Korean, Russian, Chinese) and grammatical errors (present/non-present). The dependent variables were the scores achieved on the listening comprehension posttest and the scores on each item of the perception posttest.

### **Results and Discussion**

For all three language groups combined, there were no statistically significant differences in the adjusted means between the groups that had grammatical errors and those that did not have grammatical errors in comprehension and any of the seven perception items (See Table 2).

Table 2

*ANCOVA results for adjusted means between error groups and non-error groups*

Descriptors	Adjusted means		SD	F (1, 97)	p
	Errors n=48	No Errors n=56			
Comprehension	77.402	78.201	19.178	0.050	0.823
Perception-fluency	2.269	2.802	0.906	0.345	0.559
Perception-easiness to understand	2.802	2.735	1.058	0.179	0.673
Perception-pleasantness	2.702	2.703	0.866	0.000	0.994
Perception-accentedness	2.672	2.806	1.016	0.454	0.502
Perception-will be a good teacher	2.622	2.412	0.832	1.584	0.211
Perception-educatedness	3.467	3.529	0.944	0.109	0.742
Perception-accuracy	3.053	2.988	0.96523	0.119	0.731

*Note.* Comprehension score was measured on a scale of 1-100. Ratings on perception items were measured on a scale of 1-5.

Between language groups, however, there were statistically significant differences in comprehension and the first three of the seven perception items (See Table 3). For comprehension, Chinese had the highest score and Korean had the lowest. For the first three perception items, the scores from the Korean and the Russian groups were almost the same, but there was a difference in the adjusted means between the Chinese group and these two groups. The Chinese speaker received the highest ratings in being fluent, easy to understand, and pleasant to listen to. For fluency, Korean and Russian speakers received scores that were almost one standard deviation lower than the Chinese. For easiness to understand, Korean and Russian were almost one and a half standard deviation lower than Chinese. For pleasantness, there was a difference of a half a standard deviation between these two groups and the Chinese. The effect of language made no difference on accentedness/irritability, ability to become a good teacher, educatedness, and accuracy.

Table 3  
*ANCOVA results for adjusted means among language groups*

Descriptors	Adjusted means			SD	F (2, 97)	p
	Korean n=36	Russian n=32	Chinese n=36			
Comprehension	71.133	76.578	85.693	19.178	5.851	0.004
Perception-fluency	2.487	2.511	3.251	0.960	8.212	0.001
Perception-easiness to understand	2.318	2.229	3.757	1.058	39.669	0.000
Perception-pleasantness	2.589	2.507	3.012	0.866	3.691	0.029
Perception-accentedness	2.541	3.013	2.664	1.016	1.960	0.146
Perception-will be a good teacher	2.498	2.344	2.71	0.832	1.603	0.207
Perception-educatedness	3.558	3.602	3.333	0.944	0.780	0.461
Perception-accuracy	3.084	2.995	2.983	0.965	0.118	0.889

*Note.* Comprehension score was measured on a scale of 1-100. Ratings on perception items were measured on a scale of 1-5.

Additionally, there were no statistically significant interactions between language groups and error groups in comprehension and any of the seven perception items (See Table 4). The language effect was not significantly different across error groups, and the error effect was not significantly different across language groups.

Table 4  
ANCOVA results for interaction between language and errors

Descriptors	F (1, 97)	<i>p</i>
Comprehension	0.030	0.971
Perception-fluency	1.632	0.201
Perception-easiness to understand	0.506	0.605
Perception-pleasantness	0.361	0.698
Perception-accentedness	1.229	0.297
Perception-will be a good teacher	0.213	0.804
Perception-educatedness	2.580	0.081
Perception-accuracy	0.730	0.485

It is worth noting that the comprehension and certain perceptions of the listeners of this study were affected by how fluent the speaker was perceived to be, not by whether or not the speaker had grammatical errors. The highest comprehension score received on the Chinese speaker was probably made possible due to the lowest level of attention needed on the listeners' part in understanding the speech; thanks to his fluency acquired through decades of using English as a professor. As mentioned previously, unlike the other two speakers, who were both graduate students, the Chinese speaker spent over thirty years teaching at a college in the United States, and based on the researcher's professional judgment, he clearly had the mildest accent. His fluency acquired through the extensive use of English as a professor perhaps enabled the listeners to focus on the message, and not to be distracted by the foreignness in his speech. This view can be somewhat supported by the fact that the listeners rated the Chinese speaker as significantly more fluent, easier to understand, and pleasant to listen to than the other two speakers. What is interesting is that although the Chinese speaker was rated most favorably on those three items, there was only a small difference in the adjusted means on accentedness/irritability in the three language groups. In other words, when asked to rate whether the speaker had an annoying/irritating accent, the listeners rated all three speakers almost equally. This seems to suggest that listeners in this study perceived any degree of foreign accent as a salient nonnative marker, regardless of how mild or heavy it may be objectively described. Since this survey did not ask the listeners to rank different speakers' accents but asked them to determine if they thought that these speakers had an annoying/irritating accent, it does not allow the researcher to objectively compare which accent the listeners perceived as the mildest or the heaviest. However, based on the results, we can assume that the participants in this study felt that even a mild accent was potentially annoying.

Another interesting point revealed in this study is that although the subjects considered all three second language speakers as possessing annoying accents, overall, they gave higher scores on educatedness to all three speakers, and the Chinese speaker received a slightly lower score than the other two. Although these three speakers were clearly identified as “accented” foreigners and their accents were perceived to be somewhat annoying/irritating, the listeners in this study did not equate accentedness with educatedness. It can be surmised that this was due to the quality of the arguments of the speeches. That is, the speakers were not asked to tell personal stories or make unplanned, informal speeches. Rather, they were asked to read previously prepared, well-organized speeches, which made clear and rather convincing arguments based on researched facts and agreeable points. Because they were listening to cogent arguments that were clearly organized and well supported, the listeners might have associated the quality of the arguments with the speakers’ level of intelligence. Plus, most participants in this study were probably aware of and accustomed to the presence of accented professors in higher education in the U.S.

From a TESOL professional’s perspective, the results on the specific perception item – prospect to become a good teacher – is rather disappointing. Although the participants took at least a neutral stance toward the speakers’ educatedness, none of the three speakers was thought to have a potential to become a good teacher. This seems to reveal the overall prejudice on the part of listeners in terms of having accented teachers. Although the reality of the U.S. higher education system reflects diversity among faculty members as well as the student body, the listeners in this study seemed to be hesitant to view accented teachers as good teachers.

For the last perception item, listeners were asked to rate the speakers’ accuracy and to state reasons if they felt that the speakers did not speak accurately. Approximately half of the participants (53 subjects) provided reasons, which fell into three broader categories: grammar, pronunciation, and prosody. Grammatical errors were mentioned the fewest times, whereas pronunciation errors were mentioned most frequently (See Figure 1). Out of 104 participants, only nine mentioned grammar as the source of error, whereas 31 participants named pronunciation as the reason. Thirteen participants considered prosody (e.g., stress, rhythm, intonation, and connected speech) as the source of errors. This corroborated the findings of Gynan’s (1985) study and Fayer and Krasinski’s (1987) study which identified pronunciation and prosody rather than grammar as the most distracting features in a nonnative speaker’s speech.

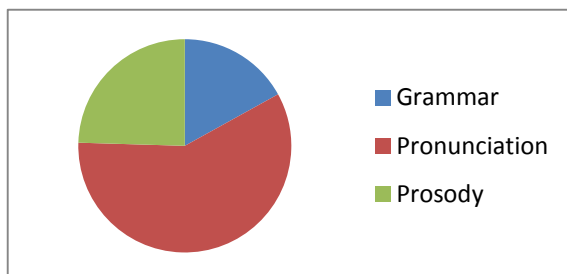


Figure 1. Reasons given for inaccuracy of nonnative English speakers' speech

The findings of this study support the view that ESL students may not need to be overly concerned about how their misuse of articles and certain non-count noun forms might affect the ability to be understood. In addition, the presence or absence of grammatical errors did not play a role in how the nonnative speakers were perceived. The results have clear pedagogical implications. That is, if intelligibility, not native-like fluency/accuracy, is considered as the most significant point in teaching English to the global audience, these difficult-to-master items do not need to receive major focus in grammar instruction when there are other more important items to be learned.

## Conclusion

This study examined how the linguistic errors made in grammatical functions – articles and noun-count noun plurals – would/might impact the second language speakers' ability to convey their message and how they might be perceived as language users when their speeches contained those errors. The specific grammatical errors examined in this study did not make a significant difference in the listeners' comprehension and perceptions. Currently, the speakers from the expanding circle now constitute the largest group of English users, and for them, this study can help restore confidence as EFL learners who are frustrated with the complex, hard-to-define rules of article usage. In this study, the majority of listener judges came from English L1 speakers, and we can reasonably assume that if most of the listeners consisted of those from the outer and expanding circles, which is indeed the case in the EIL or English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) context, the impact of these minor errors would be even more negligible. However, until the findings of this research are corroborated by further studies which involve a variety of L1 groups of listeners both in EIL and ELF contexts, these assumptions would remain speculative. It should also be noted that there are words such as *instruction* vs. *instructions* and *manner* vs. *manners*, in which the plural marker “-s” alters the meaning, and language learners need to become aware of the differences in these words for successful communication. However, the plural marker “-s” in words such as *advice* and *information* does not perform distinct semantic function(s), and therefore, adding an “-s” to these words is not likely to cause confusion.



The most significant contribution of this paper is probably the fact that those users of English who constantly struggle with the complex usage of articles and non-count noun plurals can be freed from the fear that these minor errors are likely to affect how they are understood and perceived by other English users. For teachers in the EIL context, the findings of this can help prioritize their instructional goals by identifying items that are not likely to affect the communication. The study is not without limitations. Firstly, its sample size was adequate, but relatively small. Secondly, the errors were researcher-induced, rather than being genuine learner errors. Thirdly, only two words were included as errors for non-count noun plurals. Lastly, the listeners in this study were entirely made up of college students, and different results could have been obtained if different types of listeners were brought in as judges – e.g., teachers or other groups of academic audience. Further research using a larger sample size with different groups of listener judges (e.g., groups in which native speakers are minorities as in most ELF contexts) would enhance the credibility of findings of this research.

This study does not promote the idea of abandoning or trivializing grammar instruction in these areas. It simply seeks to contribute to the error gravity studies being conducted in the field of World Englishes by helping identify grammatical items that need more attention than others when English is taught as an international language. The empirical data of this study support the view that local errors such as article usage and non-count noun plurals do not negatively affect communication, and therefore need not be overly stressed especially for many Asian language speakers, for whom complete mastery of the English article system is known to be extremely challenging.

This study has also confirmed the well-established notion that listeners tend to respond to the pronunciation. However, the strength of a speaker's accent affected only certain aspects of how the listeners perceived them, but not enough to make a difference in comprehension. If we all come to an agreement that English as an international language now belongs to everyone who uses it, then it seems logical to level the playing field so that those in the expanding circle and outer circle are not unfairly disadvantaged by the items they have trouble mastering in.

### **Acknowledgement**

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Local errors refer to those that occur in single elements such as morphemes and particles and therefore typically do not impact comprehension, whereas global errors are “those that interfere with the overall message of the text” (Ferris, 2002, pp. 57-58).

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Script for the Nonnative Speaker's Speech (with Errors)**

#### **Computerized Voting\***

Many critics think that (x\*\*) current voting systems used in the United States are inefficient. They also say that (x) system of counting votes is inaccurate. Miscounts can be dangerous in elections, especially if (x) election is a close one. Those critics offer advices on how to fix the problem—traditional systems should be replaced with computerized voting systems, which are more efficient and reliable. One major problem in traditional voting is that people accidentally vote for (x) wrong candidate. In traditional voting, voters are given (x) large sheet of paper with many names on it, which is called the ballot. Then they are to find the name of their candidate and make (x) small mark next to that name. It is very easy for people with poor eyesight to mark the wrong name. Computerized voting machines, on the other hand, are more user-friendly. They have (x) easy-to-use touch-screen technology, and to cast a vote, (x) voter just needs to touch the candidate's name on the screen. Voters can even magnify the candidate's name on the computer for easier viewing. Another major problem with old voting systems is that they rely on people to count the votes. Officials have to go through each ballot and count and record each individual vote by hand. Since they have to deal with thousands of ballots, it is almost inevitable that they will make mistakes. If any error is detected, (x)long and expensive recount has to take place. Computerized systems, on the other hand, have no problems with human error. Votes are counted quickly and automatically by the computers. Many people, however, think it's too risky to use complicated voting technology nationwide. However, complex computer technology is used every day by governments and individuals. They trust computer technology to be accurate in banking transactions as well as in (x) communication of highly sensitive informations.

\*Modified from the lecture in the writing section of the practice TOEFL test available on the ETS website.

\*\*X's denote places where errors in article usage occurred.

## Appendix 2 Survey Instrument

### Part 1

- How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
- Sex: \_\_\_\_Male \_\_\_\_Female
- Language: \_\_\_\_\_
- Academic major: \_\_\_\_\_
- Which foreign language can you speak? \_\_\_\_\_
- What is your proficiency level?
  - a. beginner      b. intermediate      c. advanced

### Part 2

Which of the following is NOT mentioned as a reason for switching to online medical records?

- a. It saves time for doctors and nurses.
- b. It is fast, easy, and more accurate.
- c. It reduces the number of visits for patients.

In the paper record system, doctors often make errors in the diagnosis because \_\_\_\_\_.

- a. they are usually rushed and don't have time to make treatment decisions.
- b. they don't have complete patient health history.
- c. patients' handwritten health information is often hard to read and can cause misunderstanding.

The speaker states that online medical records are supported by the government. (T/F)

The speaker believes that online medical records can increase patients' privacy. (T/F)

(5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 2=disagree, 1=strongly disagree)

The speaker:

- speaks fluently
- is easy to understand
- is pleasant to listen to
- has an annoying/irritating accent
- would be a good teacher
- sounds educated
- speaks accurately

### Part 3

Which of the following is NOT stated as a reason for switching to computerized voting system?

- a. It's cheaper.
- b. It's more accurate.
- c. It's more efficient.

The speaker says that in a traditional voting system, \_\_\_\_\_ are disadvantaged.

- a. people who are illiterate
- b. people with poor eyesight
- c. young people who are used to computers

The speaker argues that computerized voting system is error free. (T/F)

The speaker believes that it is risky to trust electronic banking transactions. (T/F)

(5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, 2=disagree, 1=strongly disagree)

The speaker:

- speaks fluently
- is easy to understand
- is pleasant to listen to
- has an annoying/irritating accent
- would be a good teacher
- sounds educated
- speaks accurately

○ If you felt that the speaker did not speak accurately, please provide reasons:

.....

### Note on Contributor

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## **“I think”: Topic-marking in Spoken English Discourse**

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### **Abstract**

This paper addresses the topic-marking function of pre-verbal *I think* in spoken English discourse. By establishing the functional links between *I think* and the grammatical topic marker *wa* in Japanese, this study proposes that despite its clausal configuration, *I think* is a well-defined “topic marker” in English, embodying the topic-comment structure of utterance in interaction. This study identifies the following shared features between *I think* and *wa*: they both (1) serve as an information “cleft” between topic and comment; (2) attach to a nominal expression that always represents identifiable/definite information; (3) mark the topic, the cognitive status of which is “accessible” (Chafe, 1994) but not fully activated or “in focus” (Gundel et.al., 1993); and (4) carry thematic and contrastive meanings. The analysis of interactional data further suggests that the topic-marking with *I think* is, distinct from the topic marker *wa* in Japanese, strictly an interactional phenomenon. The use of *I think* is found to be contingent upon the ways in which the ongoing discourse is deployed and the current of information is managed. The findings also suggest that the topic-comment relation achieved by *I think* is more robust than that which is expressed by other topic-marking devices such as wh-clefts. The present study concludes that the parenthetical *I think*, though its syntactic/semantic contribution to the utterance content is minimal, governs the primary aspects of interaction as a resource for managing the structure of information and achieving the discourse organization concomitant to the interactional goal(s) specific to the moment of interaction.

Keywords: parentheticals, topic marking, information structure, topic-comment, Japanese topic marker *wa*

### **Introduction**

Among various types of parentheticals (ranging from one-word to clausal types), the “private verbs” (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik, & Crystal, 1985) with the first person singular pronoun in the simple present tense such as *I think*, *I believe*, *I suppose*, and *I imagine* have received increasing attention during the last decade (see Dehé & Kavalova, 2007 for an overview). In the literature, terms such as “comment clauses



(CCs)” (cf. Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999; Brinton, 2008; Quirk et al., 1985), “complement-taking mental predicates (CTMPs)” (Schoonjans, 2012, for German equivalent *glauben*; Van Bogaert, 2010, 2011), or simply “parentheticals” (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002) are used to describe both the formal and functional aspects of these forms. In light of the syntactic feature of being “transparent” (Hooper, 1975) to tag questions, negation, and other various syntactic movements/processes, the clause-type parentheticals, due to their robust pragmatic properties, are also labeled as follows: “discourse marker” (Erman, 1987; Östman, 1981; Schiffrin, 1987; Schourup, 1985), “pragmatic particle” (Holmes, 1990), “pragmatic marker” (Brinton, 1996; Palander-Collin, 1999), “modal particle” (Aijmer, 1997), “epistemic parenthetical” (Andersen, 2001; Thompson & Mulac, 1991a, 1991b), and “reduced parenthetical clauses” (Kaltenböck, 2007; Schneider, 2007).

The extensive functional profile of the clause-type parentheticals in spoken discourse has led to investigations involving the concepts of grammaticalization and/or lexicalization. One of the main interests in the recent literature lies in the paths of development of these forms, particularly *I think*. Outside the scope of this paper are the questions of whether *I think* has diachronically progressed to a pragmatic marker/particle in English and whether such processes, if any, should be described as grammaticalization or lexicalization. However, it is worth noting that according to the grammaticalization/lexicalization cline proposed (Brinton, 1996; Thompson & Mulac, 1991a, 1991b), the medial *I think*, the targeted token in this study, is situated in the last stage and is therefore considered to be a relatively recent phenomenon.

In terms of the general tendency as to the positional distribution of *I think*, Aijmer (1997) and Kärkkäinen (2003) both find that although the units of analysis in their studies differ (utterance and intonation unit, respectively), *I think* is most likely to be placed at the initial position and then at the final position, with the medial position being least preferred. Compared with its initial and final counterparts, the amount of attention given to the medial *I think* in the literature is extremely limited, if not neglected. The limited focus in previous research concurs with the findings that the interactional contexts in which the medial *I think* occurs are mainly self-repair and discontinuous syntactic configuration (Kärkkäinen, 2003; Simon-Vandenberg, 2000). One of the few studies dealing with the medial *I think* comes from Simon-Vandenberg (2000) in which the functional properties of *I think* are delineated as follows:

(1)

Expression of the speaker’s unwillingness to fully commit the truth value of his/her statements:

- a. heard his name mentioned by Carter *I think* by Darlington while I was down there.
- b. she’s done an MA and is now on *I think* I’m not sure if she’s doing PhD

(2)

Partition between theme and rheme to give extra focus to the initial element:

- c. what he teaches *I think* is modern languages
- d. now everybody *I think* accepts that as legitimate

The targeted structure in this study is that of (2), viz. the utterance format in which *I think* appears immediately before the verb (predominantly the copula<sup>1</sup>).

The use of clausal parentheticals as a “partition” (Taglicht, 1984) between theme and rheme is of particular relevance to the concept of information “packaging” (Chafe, 1976). The term “packaging” refers to the speaker’s strategic management of syntactic, phonological, or morphological resources to tailor the message to maximize the cognitive efficiency of the hearer when processing the information. Along this line of research, Ziv (2002) examines the “second position parentheticals”, as shown in (3).

(3)

- A: Could you remind John that there’s a meeting this evening?
- B: John, *I believe*, will not attend the meeting this evening  
(but I might).

Here, the parenthetical *I believe* occurs in the second position after the initial element, John. This is called “Marked Themes (MT)” (Taglicht, 1984). The parenthetical *I believe* serves to divide the MT and the rest of the utterance components, functioning as the “link” (Birner & Ward, 1998) with the previous discourse. According to Ziv (2002), the parentheticals appearing before the subject, (4) and (5), are also regarded as maintaining the same discourse linking functions, provided they appear in the second position.

(4)

- A: Remember there are 2 meetings: one this evening and one tomorrow.
- B: This evening, *I believe*, John will not be able to attend, (but tomorrow he might).

(5)

- A: Tell John that the demonstration is at 5 p.m. and the meeting at 7.
- B: The demonstration, *I believe*, John will not be able to take part in, (but the meeting, he might).

It is argued that all of the MTs in (3)-(5), *John*, *this evening*, *the demonstration*, are isolated by the following parenthetical *I believe* and are linked with the entities with which they have an anaphoric relationship. Along the same line of reasoning, Ziv

(2002) further suggests that this linkage function is still at work with non-parentheticals, such as *however*, as well as other parentheticals:

(6)

Everybody in the office intends to be there this week.

John, *however*, will not be able to attend the meeting this evening.

Therefore, what becomes crucial is not the semantic properties of the element but rather its position (the second position in linear structure) along with the intonational properties selected for the particular utterance. Aijmer (1997) also considers both the position and prosodic features to be important to determine the functional qualities of *I think*, suggesting that medial tokens appear as part of “the speaker’s planning” (p. 24).

Regarding the prosodic characteristics of *I think*, it has been noted that tokens in medial or final positions may well be unaccented, carrying over a preceding intonation domain (Crystal, 1969; Wichmann, 2001). This claim is in contrast to the general understanding of the parentheticals that they normally constitute a separate tone group, often accompanied by salient pauses/silences (e.g., Bolinger, 1989; Taglicht, 1998). These complicated issues surrounding the use of the medial *I think* surface in its extensive pragmatic imports, thereby making a uniform account an unfathomably difficult task.

Chafe (1994) presents in-depth cognitive perspectives on the information flow and proposes three types of intonation units (IUs): (1) substantive IUs, which carry “ideas of events, states, or referents” (Chafe, 1994, p. 63), (2) regulatory IUs, which facilitate the flow of information, and (3) fragmentary IUs, such as truncated or incomplete IUs. *I think* is subsumed under the regulatory IUs along with other discourse markers and adverbs (e.g., *well*, *maybe*), but there is no specific remark on the parentheticals in general, not to mention the medial uses of *I think*.

The purpose of this study is to augment the above-mentioned previous research by focusing on preverbal *I think*. It will be shown that the pragmatic function of *I think* in the particular position is almost isomorphic with that of the Japanese topic marker *wa* in that the utterance configuration manifests itself as “topic-comment” structure. The intrinsic difference between *I think* and *wa* lies in the fact that although the particle *wa* in Japanese is well-grounded in sentence-level operations, the parenthetical *I think* inevitably requires interactional contexts in order to exhibit its topic-marking function.

The utterance formats that will not be considered in this study include those that appear syntactically as part of the matrix sentence but not before the verb and those appearing in embedded clauses (relative or subordinate clauses). Prosodic information (pitch, stress, loudness, rhythm, tempo, etc.) as well as para-linguistic features are, with their importance fully acknowledged, outside the analytic scope of this paper due to space limitations.

## Data

A total of 150 instances of *I think* in the medial position were randomly taken from the spoken part of “the Corpus of Contemporary American English” (COCA) (Davies, 2008-). The “spoken” part of COCA currently consists of 95 million words, covering the years from 1990 to 2012. The sources of transcripts come from more than 150 TV/radio programs (e.g., *All Things Considered* (NPR), *NewsHour* (PBS), *Good Morning America* (ABC), *Today Show* (NBC), and *60 Minutes* (CBS)). To investigate fairly recent phenomena surrounding the use of *I think*, the data source was deliberately limited to the 2000-2012 texts. Since the COCA only contains a limited length of texts, I consulted the full transcripts and the video clips available online whenever I needed to refer to more extended contexts. For those excerpts not covered by the COCA, I edited the relevant portion of the full transcripts based on the transcript notations provided in the Appendix.

## Topic marker *wa* in Japanese

Previous accounts of the topic marker *wa* abound and often appear in a form of comparative analyses with the nominative case marker *ga*, particularly in the generative framework. It is widely accepted that *wa*-marked and *ga*-marked constituents represent “old/given” and “new” information, respectively, and the notions put forth by Kuno (1972, 1973) are still dominant in the literature. The two primary functions identified by Kuno (1972) for the topic marker *wa* are “thematic” and “contrastive”.

*Wa* marks either the theme or the contrasted element of the sentence. The theme must be either anaphoric (i.e. previously mentioned) or generic, while there is no such constraint for the contrasted element. (Kuno, 1972, p. 270)

The “thematic” role of *wa*, often rendered into English as “Speaking of ..., talking about ...” as in (7), is to mark the *theme* of the sentence. According to Kuno (1976), the definition of *topic* or *theme* is “what the rest of the sentence is about” – the traditional “aboutness” condition that is still widely accepted in the current research.

(7)

*wa* for the theme of a sentence: “Speaking of ..., talking about ...”

[Topic] [Comment]

John-*wa* gakusee desu.

John-TOP student is

“Speaking of John, he is a student.”

Example of contrastive *wa* is in (8).

(8)

*wa* for contrasts: “X ... , but ... , as for X ...”

John-*wa* sono hon-o      yon-da ga      Mary-*wa* yoma-nakat-ta.

John-TOP that book-ACC read-PAST but Mary-TOP read-NEG-PAST

“John read the book, but Mary didn’t.”

(Kuno, 1973)

Although the thematic use of *wa* tends to be foregrounded as its primary function in the literature, there are some discourse studies offering a view that the two functions of *wa* are neither mutually exclusive nor binary in nature. Clancy and Downing (1987), for instance, suggest that underlying the thematic function of *wa* is its contrastive import. This can be explained by the fact that the act of introducing a new topic itself involves the process of contrasting a set of nominal candidates. It is argued that the extent to which *wa* performs its thematic function is more restricted than has hitherto been claimed and that *wa* is in fact a “local cohesive device, linking textual elements of varying degrees of contrastivity” (Clancy & Downing, 1987, p. 46).

In terms of the topic-comment structure realized by the topic marker *wa*, Iwasaki (2013) suggests that the particular construction can only be used when the speaker believes the entity designated as the topic is “identifiable” (Chafe, 1976; Lambrecht, 1994) to the addressee. More specifically, it is suggested that the topic must represent “definite” information and that in communicative contexts, a nominal entity can gain the status of a topic if it is made “identifiable” by the following (non)linguistic means:

(9)

- a. Shared knowledge, e.g., *the sun, the moon, the President of the United States, my mom, “John”* between two people who share a particular “John” as a mutual acquaintance.
- b. Deixis, e.g., *watashi* “I”, *anata* “you”, *kore* “this”, *are* “that”, *kyoo* “today”, *kinoo* “yesterday”.
- c. Modifier, e.g., *boku no kuruma* “my car”, *weetoressu* “waitress”, in a phrase such as *kinoo itta resutoran no weetoressu* “the waitress of a restaurant I went to yesterday”.
- d. “Frame” (Fillmore, 1982) as a supercategory, e.g., “*the passport*” may become identifiable as soon as an overseas trip is mentioned.
- e. “Presentational” formulaic expression such as *mukashi mukashi aru tokoro ni hitori no obaasan ga sunde-imashita* “Once upon a time, there lived an old woman.”
- f. A generic NP, e.g., the concept of “elephant”, the concept of “love”.

(Iwasaki, 2013, p. 239-240; expressions modified)

Iwasaki (2013) further notes that the condition of a nominal referent being “identifiable” is not sufficient for it to become a *wa*-marked topic; it must be “sufficiently activated in the mind of the addressee, or salient in discourse” (p. 240). If, however, the referent becomes “salient to the highest degree” in the surrounding discourse context, then zero-anaphora is to be employed (Iwasaki, 2013, p. 240). In other words, the nominal expression must be “moderately” salient to receive *wa* marking. To date, there have been no studies that offer theoretical explications about the degree of discourse saliency required for *wa*-marking based on conversation data<sup>2</sup>. The majority of previous accounts of *wa* heavily depend on Kuno’s above-mentioned notions of topic/theme.

Any attempts to articulate the information status of the topic nominal as well as the topic-comment flow of information in any languages inevitably encounter the complexity involved in defining concepts such as “topic”, “comment”, and “given/new” information. Other widely accepted terminologies for the binary notion of “topic/comment” include “presupposition/focus” (Chomsky, 1971; Jackendoff, 1972), “topic/focus” (Gundel, 1974; Lambrecht, 1994; Reinhart, 1982), and “theme/rheme” (see Daneš, 1974; Firbas, 1964; Vallduví, 1992). As is often noted, the use of these terminologies in the literature, however, is not consistent, and the lack of uniform definition confounds the conceptual problems further. Grounded in the need to elucidate these terminological issues, Gundel’s work (e.g., Gundel, 1988; Gundel & Fretheim, 2004) offers valuable theoretical insights, including the distinction between the “relational givenness/newness” and “referential givenness/newness”. Gundel and Fretheim (2004, p. 181) hold that the long-standing view of correlating the “topic” with “given” information needs to be specified further, such that the topic is “given” in both relational and referential schemes. That is, the topic is “given” in relation to the comment part within a domain of sentence configuration (“relationally given”) and represents familiar or uniquely identifiable information (“referentially given”). The “referential givenness” is a scalar notion, as represented by the Givenness Hierarchy (Gundel, Hedberg, & Zacharski, 1993), which is comparable to the well-known concepts of “assumed familiarity” (Prince, 1981), “discourse/hearer-familiarity” (Prince, 1992), and “activation states/costs” (Chafe, 1994; Lambrecht, 1994). It represents degrees of salience in terms of the mental representation of the referent in the mind of the addressee.

Based on these previous findings, the characteristics of *wa*-marked nominal expression (topic) in Japanese can be reformulated as follows<sup>3</sup>:

(10)

1. Identifiable/definite<sup>4</sup> or generic
2. Identifiability and definiteness are warranted by the following “familiarity” grounds:

- a. anaphoric (previous mentioning in prior discourse)
  - b. deictic
  - c. situational
  - d. general world knowledge within which the concept of “frame” is subsumed
3. “Given” referentially (as justified in 2) and relationally

In the next section, I wish to point out that a nominal expression followed by the parenthetical *I think* also shares characteristics 1-3 above, functioning as a topic in the topic-comment configuration. It will also be demonstrated that tokens of the medial *I think* have the same pragmatic functions of specifying the thematic and the contrastive imports in spoken discourse. The analysis suggests that although *I think* has no contribution to the formal aspects of the utterance structure, it plays a critical role in the realm of information structure by establishing the topical milepost, by reference to which the subsequent discourse unfolds. The use of *I think* enables the speaker to design the utterance best-suited to the immediate goal of interaction, and, for the hearer, it becomes a key guidepost when processing the information.

### **The role of *I think* as a topic marker**

#### ***The functional correspondence with wa***

Tokens of the medial *I think* in spoken English are observed to be a “cleft” between the information status of topic (“given”) and that of comment (“new”), indicating the left-most element to be the new topical ground. Separated from the rest of the utterance components with *I think* immediately following, the topic nominal provides an interpretive domain, within which some new information is put forth by the comment. This two-step manner of presentation is consistent with the traditional description of the topic-comment structure illustrated by Hockett (1958).

As in the case of the Japanese *wa*, the parenthetical *I think* is also attached to an identifiable/definite nominal, bearing on the thematic and the contrastive purport. The thematic property of *I think* is particularly evident in the cases where the topic nominal provides “a spatial, temporal or individual framework within which the main predication holds” (Chafe, 1976). Consider example (11).

(11) (111214) [Fox\_Hannity]

- |   |          |  |
|---|----------|--|
| 1 | BENNETT: | ... It's not a hard right country, and by the way, I think Newt is |
| 2 |          | not a hard right guy. I think his ideas are all over the map as    |
| 3 |          | I've said. But I think it's a center right country and I think we  |
| 4 |          | want to put someone up there who is going to beat Barack           |
| 5 |          | Obama and where the campaign is going to be on the issues,         |
| 6 |          | not on the personality.  |

7 HANNITY: I think this process is healthy.  
8 BENNETT: Sure.  
9 HANNITY: I think the American people have followed it. They've made  
10 adjustments. Tomorrow night **I think** is a big night I believe  
11 because I think that narrative will carry through the Christmas  
12 holiday and then we're right into the caucuses after.  
13 BENNETT: People will take a good hard look. The people of Iowa will,  
14 you know, give it a lot of scrutiny. Sunlight is the best  
15 disinfectant. And that's what we're putting on now, a lot of  
16 sunlight.  
17 HANNITY: All right. By the way, I love "The Book of Man." ...

In line 10, *I think* is attached to the nominal “Tomorrow night”, which offers a temporal frame within which the specification “is a big night” is provided. Mention of the debate scheduled to be held on the following day occurs toward the beginning of this interview session. Therefore, the idea of “tomorrow night” is not “new”; i.e., the cognitive status of this particular topic nominal is “semiactive” (Chafe, 1994). The re-establishment of the topic previously mentioned at the beginning is indicative of the possibility that the entire session is about to close, which is later confirmed by HANNITY’s acknowledgement token (“All right”) and the topic shift (“By the way”) in line 17. The interview session ceased immediately after the utterance produced by HANNITY.

It is often the case that the thematic function of *I think* is used when a slight topic adjustment is necessary for the same referent mentioned in the immediately preceding discourse. In (12), the nominal marked by *I think*, “Senator Clinton”, is re-established with the usage of her official title.

(12) (080210) [THIS WEEK 10:01 AM EST]

1 G.S: Governor O'Malley, is there anything more the Clintons need  
2 to do to assure voters that they're not seeking some kind of  
3 restoration or co-presidency?  
4 M.O.: You know what, I think that Senator Clinton **I think** is doing the  
5 very best she can under some withering criticism and, you know, that  
6 ebbs and flows in the national media. But the issue here is which of  
7 these two candidates has the experience and the strength necessary to  
8 not only defeat John McCain in the fall, but also to dig out of a huge  
9 hole that George Bush has put us into. In this Chesapeake primary,  
10 as we approach, we are looking at issues like the health of our  
11 environment and, here

In line 4, “Senator Clinton” is re-introduced as an individual, whereas she was previously referred to with the collective term “Clintons” in line 1. The focal aspect of the topic is now Senator Clinton as an individual, to which the comment “is doing the very best she can under some withering criticism” is added. This thematic use of *I think* involves slight contrastive import.



The contrastive function of *I think* becomes more evident in (13).

(13) (20020907) [CNN\_Novak]

- |    |        |  |
|----|--------|--|
| 1  | NOVAK: | your counterpart on the Senate side, Democratic Senator Bob                |
| 2  |        | Graham, also of Florida, has said that after you finish this               |
| 3  |        | investigation he would entertain the idea of a public blue ribbon          |
| 4  |        | commission to look into the 9/11 situation. Do you agree with              |
| 5  |        | that?  |
| 6  | GOSS:  | I have no problems with whatever is going to come next. What I             |
| 7  |        | hope is that we are allowed to finish our work without any further         |
| 8  |        | interruptions and we can deliver a product that is pure and factual        |
| 9  |        | to the American people. After that, what we are going to do with           |
| 10 |        | that product <b>I think</b> will be up to the leaders of the nation on how |
| 11 |        | they proceed. My question...   |
| 12 | NOVAK: | But you wouldn't object to a blue ribbon investigation after that?         |
| 13 | GOSS:  | I don't know what a blue ribbon investigation is, but I think there        |
| 14 |        | will be follow-on to what we do. In fact, I would be disappointed if       |
| 15 |        | there weren't.   |

Again, the nominal expression, “what we are going to do with that product”, represents a new focal point, which is related to but distinct from the topic in the preceding discourse. The center of attention is now the procedure to be taken after accomplishing the foremost objective of delivering “a product that is pure and factual to the American people” (lines 8-9). The pre-verbal *I think* signals the upgraded topic, which is “given”, but not fully activated, thereby informing the interlocutor of the need to prepare for receiving the new information about the newly adjusted topic.

The distinction between the topic nominal marked by *I think* and a non-marked, regular subject lies in the fact that although both represent “given” information, the *I think*-marked topic is “heavy” in terms of its syntactic shape and/or the amount of mental energy required for establishing the cognitive representation of the intended referent/idea. Excerpt (14), for example, involves a lengthy topic nominal, which is unlikely to occur as a non-marked subject.

(14) (100413) [NPR\_TalkNat]

- |   |         |   |
|---|---------|---|
| 1 | SIEGEL: | a...AIG might be a loss. Unfortunately, General Motors,GMAC,                  |
| 2 |         | there are losses there, and then the biggest losses are in the                |
| 3 |         | government-sponsored area. So one thing is that it's not going to be          |
| 4 |         | as bad, bottom line, at all in terms of what the taxpayers going to           |
| 5 |         | take the hit, but more importantly and that's my specialty is monetary        |
| 6 |         | policy and theory. Bernanke stepping in and making sure money                 |
| 7 |         | funds were safe, that your deposits were safe and stabilizing the             |
| 8 |         | system, making sure the banks didn't all fail at that time <b>I think</b> are |
| 9 |         | absolutely critical in preventing The Great Recession from becoming           |

10                                   The Great Depression.  
 11       CONAN:               Robert Reich?  
 12       REICH:               I think that Jeremy's right on that, basically. But here's what worries  
 13                                   me. Having bailed out the big banks once, those big banks are  
 14                                   assuming they have to be assuming - their investors, the lenders to  
 15                                   them are assuming that they will be bailed out again if they get into a  
 16                                   similar problem.

In this example, the nominal marked by *I think* is “Bernanke stepping in and making sure money funds were safe, that your deposits were safe and stabilizing the system, making sure the banks didn't all fail at that time” (lines 6-8). Although this seems to be in sharp contrast with the general understanding that in right-branching languages such as English, a heavy syntactic component tends to be placed toward the end of the sentence, this syntactically dense nominal is nonetheless considered “light” in that it simply elucidates the immediately preceding notion of “monetary policy and theory” (lines 5-6). As the topic, it also represents “given” information in relation to its comment, “are absolutely critical in preventing The Great Recession from becoming The Great Depression” (lines 8-10). In the preceding turn, CONAN, the host, touches upon SIEGEL’s claim by paraphrasing his words: “the Fed and the government did the right thing, that in fact, they prevented what could have been not just a great recession but another great depression”. Thus, the idea of a great recession becoming a great depression is unarguably “given”, while its preventative measure embodies new information. The use of *I think* signals a point of change in the type of information being ensued, reminding the interlocutor of the need to first digest a relatively heavy topic and then prepare for receiving new information about that particular topic.

In sum, the topics marked by *I think* in (11)-(14) exhibit varying degrees of binding with the previous discourse; the topics are reiterated in (11), re-established after being adjusted in (12), upgraded in (13), and recapitulated in (14). They are all identifiable/definite nominal expressions, and their “familiarity” is warranted by the previous mention of the same referent/idea or by the conceptualized knowledge already invoked by the previous discourse development. The notion of “givenness” varies from the ones that are easily accessible to those that are almost brand-new, but no case was found in which the nominal marked by *I think* is in the cognitive status of fully activated or “in focus” (Gundel et al., 1993).

There are also cases in which the “givenness” of the topic is ascribed to the interlocutor’s registry of general knowledge, as shown in (15).

(15) (20020720) [CNN KingWknd]

1       MCMAHON:       The collar had to be just right. The scarf, you know,  
 2                                   everything perfect. So, to have him thrown in there soaking  
 3                                   wet, everybody loved it. All the times he nailed me, I was  
 4                                   rejoicing when I saw that.

5 KING: There were so many surprises on that show. Carson was very  
6 different from Paar. What do you think his, for want of a  
7 better term, secret was?  
8 MCMAHON: I think it was -- he was like every man. He was, you know,  
9 being from the midwest **I think** gave him a kind of a  
10 demeanor and a temperament and a style that, you know, he  
11 could be the next door neighbor. You felt like you knew  
12 Johnny Carson. You know, Paar was over there. Even Steve  
13 Allen, as much as you thought you knew Steve Allen, you  
14 wouldn't think of him as your next door neighbor. But you  
15 might think of Johnny. And I think he had that. And then he  
16 could be, which is wonderful,...

In this excerpt, the topic nominal “being from the midwest” is not previously mentioned but is loosely connected to the expression “he was like every man” (line 8). The “givenness” of the information is ascribable to the stereotypical view being held toward “someone from midwest” and also to the shared understanding that Johnny Carson was from Iowa. The speaker’s reliance on the shared common ground is well-marked by the consecutive use of *you know* in lines 8, 10 and 12. Here, *you know* “signals a message requesting that the hearer appreciate and/or be in sympathy with the speaker’s point of view” (Fraser, 1988, p. 26)<sup>5</sup>. As an answer to KING’s question about Johnny Carson’s “secret” (line 6-7), MCMAHON presents “being from the midwest” as the renewed topical ground, based on which the subsequent sequences are pursued for elaboration.

The next example (16) is the case where the “givenness” of the topic can be sourced from both the previous discourse and the world knowledge, including the notion of “frame” (Fillmore, 1982).

(16) (110714) [NPR\_FreshAir]

1 CHEN: I completely understand. I mean most people are still teaching  
2 classes the way that you just described. I think, you know, at  
3 Abilene this is just one program and it's just something they're  
4 still experimenting with.  
5 DAVIES: OK. Let's talk about some other areas where you see iPhone and  
6 iPhone applications as potentially transformative. Medicine, what  
7 are we seeing there?  
8 CHEN: Personal health monitoring **I think** is going to be a pretty big  
9 thing in the next few years. And something I mentioned in the  
10 book is a group of researchers who are working on a digital  
11 contact lens that communicates with a smartphone, potentially.  
12 So the contact lens takes information and transfers it, wirelessly,  
13 to the smartphone. And what the contact lens is doing is it's  
14 collecting information from the surface of your eye. What's  
15 interesting about the eye is that the eye is like the little door

In line 5, DAVIES, the host, shifts the direction of the talk by saying “Let’s talk about some other areas where you see iPhone and iPhone applications as potentially transformative” and addresses the question in the form of left-dislocation (“Medicine, what are we seeing there?”) (lines 6-7), which is often used to introduce new entities into the discourse context (Geluykens, 1992; Gundel, 1985; Prince, 1997). It sets the frame for the subsequent talk by limiting the subject-matter of the ensuing discussion to the field of Medicine, to which additional restriction of the topical frame, “personal health monitoring”, is imposed by *I think* (line 8). The referential network among the concept of iPhone/iPhone application being transformative, the field of medicine, and personal health monitoring is believed to exist in the interlocutor’s general registry at the time of utterance production.

The analysis confirms that although the parenthetical *I think* is considered as having minimal contribution to the message due to its syntactic independence, it is an essential means of expressing some recognizable features on the plane of information flow. More specifically, the findings suggest that the use of *I think* is contingent upon the topic-comment relation emerged via interaction and is firmly grounded in the need for “information packaging”, the purpose of which is to “optimize the entry of data into the hearer’s knowledge-store” (Vallduví, 1992). In this respect, the function of *I think* is comparable to that of a punctuation mark used in writing – an essential device for managing the information flow not otherwise specified.

The findings suggest the following functional equivalencies between *I think* and *wa*: both (1) attach to a nominal expression sharing the characteristics listed in (10); (2) serve as a partition between topic and comment; and (3) inherently mark theme and contrast.

### ***Features of topic marking in English***

Despite the shared characteristics attested, the fact that *I think* lacks grammatical integration with the sentence structure brings about the major difference between the two topic markers; *I think* occurs, almost invariably, in interactional talk<sup>6</sup>. The written part of COCA, for example, contains 78 tokens of *I think* in targeted construction, a majority of which (66 tokens) is either a citation of quoted speech or texts written in colloquial style. As shown in the previous section, the medial *I think* in English plays a specialized role in managing the on-line information flow, and its use is targeted at achieving the interactional goal(s) specific to the moment of interaction. For this reason, the topic marking with *I think* is considered to be much more strategic, but resilient, compared with that of Japanese *wa*; *I think* needs to be precisely positioned pre-verbally after the subject and is called upon only in the interactional context where the topic marking is rendered a key factor for determining the direction of the talk.

In the morphologically modest system of English, topic marking is often associated with word-order strategies such as wh-clefts, left-dislocation, and topicalization. Kim

(1995), for instance, identifies the main functions of wh-clefts as re-establishing the topic, marking contrast, abstracting the key point, and foregrounding the speaker's epistemological or affective stance. Hedberg and Fadden (2007) also conclude that the wh-cleft clause always behaves like the topic, giving rise to the topic-comment structures. The present study proposes that the parenthetical *I think*, along with these word-order strategies, constitutes the topic-marking system in English, primarily taking on the on-line need of calling the interlocutor's attention to "what is a matter of standing current interest or concern" (Strawson, 1964, p. 97). Therefore, it is perfectly possible to employ both wh-cleft and *I think* within the same utterance, as shown in (17).

(17) (090927) [CBS FaceNat]

- 1        GRAHAM:        Here's my concern about the next eighteen months. We're
- 2                        looking at a trifecta of disasters here: If Iran is not checked,
- 3                        they're going to have a nuclear weapon in the next eighteen
- 4                        months. If we don't reinforce Afghanistan now and turn around
- 5                        the military situation (.) the Taliban are going to take over part
- 6                        or all of Afghanistan. And if NATO doesn't jump into the fight
- 7                        with both feet they're going to become a paper tiger. We could
- 8                        have (.) three major disasters that affect our national security for
- 9                        years to come (.) if we use half measures. Reject half measures.
- 10       SMITH:        I tried to get an answer from the secretary of state. <Do you
- 11                        really believe the Iranians are currently working on a nuclear
- 12                        weapon.>
- 13       GRAHAM:        (1.0) Absolutely, I believe they are. I believe the holocaust
- 14                        existed. (0.2) I've got one rule of thumb. If the President of a
- 15                        country denies the holocaust (0.2) you should believe the worst
- 16                        not the best about what they're doing. (0.2) Clearly they're
- 17                        hiding nuclear programs for a purpose. They're trying to
- 18                        develop a nuclear weapon. and if they are (0.4) successful (0.4)
- 19                        the Sunni-Arab states in the region will want a nuclear weapon,
- 20                        (0.2) Israel becomes much at risk, and we're walking down the
- 21                        road to Armageddon. We have about eighteen months (0.4)
- 22                        using the international community to decisively act. No more
- 23                        half measures. China (0.4) is supplying one third of the refine
- 24                        petroleum to Iran. They need to join with the Russians,
- 25       SMITH:        [huh.
- 26       GRAHAM:        [the United States, and the international community (.) to< bring
- 27                        this regime uh to reality.> (1.2) Sanctions only work if they
- 28                        change behavior.
- 29       SMITH:        All right=
- 30       GRAHAM:        =We need to empower the Iranian people and deter their regime.
- 31       SMITH:        Crippling sanctions have been talked about. And the idea that=
- 32       GRAHAM:        Yeah.
- 33       SMITH:        =all options should be left open, (0.4) opens the door to military
- 34                        action. When (0.2) might (0.2) military action when when
- 35                        should it be considered?

36 (1.0)  
37 GRAHAM: At the last resort when all meaningful sanctions fail. and what  
38 we do in Afghanistan (.) will affect the ability of Iran to get  
39 the message. This regime needs to be delivered a message (.)  
40 that the international community is deadly serious about  
41 stopping their nuclear program. So we have not (.) tried uh  
42 meaningful sanctions yet. We've got a little bit of time to do that,  
43 but at the end of the day the worst thing that could happen to  
44 this country in my view (.) is for Iran to get a nuclear weapon  
45 because that (.) changes everything in the Mideast for the worst  
46 and what we do in Afghanistan (0.2) **I think** will affect the  
47 outcome in Iran.  
48 SMITH: So, let's stay on Afghanistan for a second. What if uh Afghan if  
49 General McChrystal doesn't get the forty thousand troops he  
50 asked for.  
51 (1.4)  
52 GRAHAM: We're going to lose. (.) We'll be driven out. The Taliban will  
53 come back stronger than they were before...

In his first turn-utterance (lines 1-9), GRAHAM notes three possible disastrous situations involving Iran, Afghanistan, and NATO that the U.S. might face in the next 18 months. Among these problems, SMITH takes up the first issue of the nuclear programs possibly being undertaken by Iran and delivers the question, employing a slow speech (“Do you really believe the Iranians are currently working on a nuclear weapon”) in lines 10-12. GRAHAM responds with the question, which involves the emphatic element “really”, by providing an unambiguous answer “Absolutely” (line 13). After GRAHAM’s elaboration on his belief about the nuclear weapon possibly being developed by Iran and articulation of his firm stance, SMITH delivers his next question in lines 34-35 again in a slow, clear manner. GRAHAM then explains that military action is the last resort and that the course of action to be taken in Afghanistan will become the key to bringing about changes in Iran. For the latter, the wh-cleft (“what we do in Afghanistan”) is employed twice (lines 37-38 and line 46), with the second use being marked by *I think*. The repetitive purport is made evident as the utterance structure of both wh-clefts is identical: “and what we do in Afghanistan will affect X”. The first wh-cleft serves to shift the center of attention from Iran and its suspected nuclear project to the decision on Afghanistan, providing a meaningful linkage with the “trifecta of disasters” previously mentioned in lines 1-9. The topic-marking function of the second cleft clause (line 46) is rather weak, however, due to the second mentioning of the same topic and also because of its position; i.e., appearing at the end of the turn-utterance, the summarizing function of the wh-cleft becomes more robust than its topic-setting function. In light of this particular discourse context being deployed, the topic marker *I think* is called upon to re-establish the topic, without which GRAHAM’s utterance is understood as a simple wrap-up of the previous discourse

sequences. The cleft clause with *I think* has successfully renewed its status as the topic, as confirmed by the uptake immediately given by SMITH, “So let’s stay on Afghanistan for a second” (line 48). The topic-comment relation achieved by *I think* is also corroborated; the topic “what we do in Afghanistan” is followed by the comment constituting new information relative to the topic (“will affect the outcome in Iran”). In addition, the pause observed immediately after the topic verifies the segmentation at the level of information flow. The analysis suggests that the topic-comment relation achieved by *I think* is more of the substantiated type than that which is marked by wh-cleft and that *I think* takes on the on-line need of bolstering the topic marking in interaction.

It has been shown that the topic marking by *I think* is contingent upon the ways in which the discourse is deployed on a moment-to-moment basis and as an interactional phenomenon. It emerges when the indication of topic becomes relevant to achieving the interactional goal(s) at hand. The underlying premise of using this particular form of topic-marking is that all participants are actively engaged in interaction, orienting themselves to the same interactional goal(s), the implication of which is higher frequency of topic-marking *I think* in goal/task-oriented interactions. The syntactic heaviness and the cognitive burden often rendered by the topic marking with *I think* can be justified by this shared attitudinal footing.

## Conclusion

There is vast evidence attesting that in English, the properties of topic are typically expressed by the subject, with intonation and syntax being the other resources available for ensuring topic marking. Additionally, in subject-prominent languages such as English, the employment of a topic marker is, technically speaking, considered highly unlikely or unnecessary (Li & Thompson, 1976).

The present paper claims that the parenthetical *I think* is a specialized coding device for topic marking, the overall functions of which are very much comparable to those of the full-fledged topic marker *wa* in Japanese. Along with the striking similarities between *I think* and *wa*, the fundamental difference between the two topic markers is also presented: the topic marking with *I think* is an interactional phenomenon such that the use of *I think* is subject to the speaker’s choice and the specific goal of interaction being locally enforced. It reveals the speaker’s effort to achieve the interactional goal with the utmost efficiency and effectiveness. The findings of this study include the case in which the topic marking is interactionally pursued to the extent that syntactic alternations alone are found to be inadequate.

The specific function of *I think* in the realm of information structure cannot be fully captured by the semantic/pragmatic descriptions of *I think* proposed by the previous studies, viz. modal (“attitudinal”, “epistemic”) or non-modal (specifying a mental

process) meanings. Future research is needed to pursue the task of establishing the functional links between the medial *I think* and those appearing in initial/final positions, or to consider the topic-marking phenomenon from the perspective of grammaticalization. It is hoped that the present study can contribute to a better understanding of the manifold functions of *I think* and will offer insight into the current efforts to elucidate the complex nature of parentheticals in general.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) propose three types of copulas other than *be*:

(1) perception copulas (mental or sensory), e.g., *appear, seem, feel, look, smell*, etc.

(2) state copulas, e.g., *lie, remain, rest, stand*.

(3) change-of-state copulas, e.g., *become, come, fall, get, go, grow, run, turn*, etc.

<sup>2</sup>Investigations as to the relationship between the *wa*-marked NP and its referential status are conducted in broad areas of linguistics (e.g., Portner & Yabushita, 1998; Hirotani & Schumacher, 2011). The findings are consistent with those presented in discourse-based studies; the *wa*-marked NP marks identifiable/definite information and that its possible cognitive states include “given, inferred, or unused (i.e., new to the discourse, but known via general knowledge)” (Hirotani & Schumacher, 2011).

<sup>3</sup>Another condition suggested but not fully investigated yet for the Japanese *wa* is that it must appear in clause-initial position (Vermeulen, 2009). Relevant to this is the discussion surrounding the definition of “theme” in English (cf. Fries, 1983; Halliday, 1967).

<sup>4</sup>It is acknowledged that the concept of ‘identifiability’ should not be equated with that of ‘definiteness’ (See Lyons, 1999).

<sup>5</sup>Here, I equate *you know* with *y’ know* in this particular discourse context. Fraser’s account (1988) cited is targeted at *y’ know*.

<sup>6</sup>Consistent with this view is the general agreement that clausal parentheticals occur with greater frequency in spoken English than in written texts (Biber et al., 1999; Kaltenböck, 2005).

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### **Appendix: Transcript notations**

[	overlapping talk
?	rising intonation
.	falling/utterance-final intonation
,	continuing intonation
(.)	micro-pause
(0.2)	pause: numbers in parentheses indicate pauses in seconds and tenths of seconds
<u>XXX</u>	emphasis
< >	slow talk
=	latching

### **Note on Contributor**

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## **Examining the Issue of Academic Procrastination in an Asian EIL Context: The Case of Omani University Students**

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### **Abstract**

The objective of this study is to examine the issue of procrastination in completing and submitting time-bound academic tasks/assignments in an Asian EIL context, at an Omani University. This study investigates academic procrastination from a student perspective and reports on external and internal factors that prevent English majors at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) from completing assignments on time. Questionnaire data from 40 SQU English majors were analysed. Results indicate that procrastination is a result of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, and it is mainly related to two components of self-regulation: managing time and making decisions. Results also suggest that motivational variables can be regarded as key components of self-regulated learning and can be used to understand students' level of academic procrastination. Evidently, the results give a definite indication concerning the potential negative association between procrastination and deficiencies on students' psychological dimension. Obviously, when self-regulation is depleted, the probability of procrastination increases.

**Keywords:** Academic procrastination; self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic reasons, negative academic performance

### **Procrastination in higher education**

Consider the man who puts off taking medical treatment for cardiovascular disease, and then suddenly suffers a heart attack. Or the woman who delays paying taxes which later on causes a financial penalty (Farran, 2004). In these situations, "putting off purposeful and necessary action can result in serious negative, perhaps fatal, consequences" (Farran, 2004, p.2). But what if a college student submits his term paper late? Will he face the same negative results? Before talking about consequences, it is important first

to note that academic procrastination is not an unlikely behavioral pattern among university students. Academic Procrastination (AP), which includes failure to meet deadlines for task completion, is usually widespread in college settings. Many studies (Lee, 2005; Onwuegbuzie and Jiao, 2000; Rabin, Fogel & Nutter-Upham, 2011; Owens & Newbegin, 1997; Solomon & Rothblum 1984) indicate that many students postpone and delay the submission of academic tasks till and beyond the stipulated deadline. As Owens & Newbegin (1997) remark, procrastination is common among college students, even though failure to perform academic work in a timely fashion leads to lower grades. Onwuegbuzie and Jiao (2000) report that “approximately 95 per cent of college students procrastinate on academic tasks such as writing term papers, studying for examinations, and keeping up with weekly reading assignments” (p. 45). Indeed, it is likely that it might become habitual behavior since all students procrastinate almost daily. Academic procrastination is usually described as “failing to perform an activity within the desired time frame or postponing until the last minute activities one ultimately intends to complete” (Wolters, 2003, p. 179). It can also be defined as delaying tasks intentionally and needlessly.

The phenomenon is regarded as harmful because it results in negative academic performance. For instance, according to Rabin, Fogel and Nutter-Upham (2011), approximately 60% of US college students delay submitting academic tasks to the point of experiencing despair and anxiety. Other detrimental outcomes are associated with “missing deadlines for submitting assignments, delaying the taking of the self-paced quizzes, low course grades, and course withdrawal” (Onwuegbuzie, 2008, p. 2). Overall, these negative outcomes cause students to have poor grades, withdraw from courses and so increase the period they stay in college. Besides, procrastination is associated with psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, fear of failure, and lack of self-confidence. It causes, as Tice and Baumeister (1997) comment, personal stress.

Several studies have investigated how much procrastination can affect people’s quality of life. To cite an example, Farran (2004) views procrastination as “that habit of postponing or deferring taking action on tasks that are subjectively recognized as important to perform, such delay resulting in subjective emotional discomfort” (p. 15 ). Most researchers agree that procrastination can be divided into two types – general and academic. General procrastination refers to everyday non-academic procrastination such as postponing household chores. Yet academic procrastination reflects a specific domain in educational settings. In the words of Wolters (2003), it is “knowing that one is supposed to, perhaps even wanting to, complete an academic task but failing to perform the activity within the expected or desired time frame” (p. 179). Some researchers have studied the factors that lead students to procrastinate. For instance, while Solomon and Rothblum (1984) have found that fear of failure and aversion to the task – rebellion against control – are the main factors the results of Lee’s study (2005)

indicate an association between high procrastination and lack of self-determined motivation.

With regard to “demographic” and “psychiatric” variables, some studies, including Rabin, Fogel and Nutter-Upham (2011), have investigated their relevance. However, there seems to be no clear indication of a relationship between procrastination and gender, or age and learning disabilities, even though some studies report negative correlations. Relevant studies, however, signpost the detrimental outcomes of procrastination which correlate positively with missing assignments, poor performance, cramming, low course grades, anxiety and course withdrawal (Rabin, Fogel, & Nutter-Upham, 2011). All this reflects the negative perception of this phenomenon as it is regarded as a deficit and as self-handicapping behavior. However, Chu and Choi (2005) indicate that not all types of academic procrastination have harmful and negative effects. They distinguish between two types of procrastinators – passive and active. Passive procrastinators can be described in the traditional way as simply those who put off doing assignments or submitting a term paper until the last possible moment. By contrast, active procrastinators tend to be like non-procrastinators in terms of “purposive use of time, control of time, self-efficacy belief, coping styles, and outcomes, including academic performance” (Chu & Choi, 2005, p. 245). These findings show that we need a more sophisticated, perhaps an inclusive understanding of this behavioral pattern and its implications.

Against the backdrop of these issues, understanding academic procrastination is crucial as it could provide a way to help students to be more productive and live better lives. Thus, as no previous studies, to the best of our knowledge and understanding, had been conducted on this phenomenon in Oman before, we believe that conducting this research might add new findings and insights to the psychological and educational literature. With this pedagogical motive, the present study, conducted from a student perspective, was initiated to investigate the causes of procrastination in completing and submitting time-bound assignments in order to explore pedagogical perspectives and draw educational implications from its findings.

### **Studies on procrastination: Theoretical perspectives**

In the interest of clarity and fitness of this study, this section provides a brief account of academic procrastination and the factors causing it. We have examined perspectives from past and present studies to help provide an informed understanding of this phenomenon. It examines the historical roots of procrastination, its nature as an educational construct, the factors causing it, and its effects on students’ performance and quality of life.



### ***Etymology and historical roots of procrastination***

Procrastination is derived from the Latin word “procrastinates” which combines “pro”, implying forward motion, and “cras” meaning tomorrow. Although some researchers see procrastination as a modern problem resulting from technological advances, in which adhering to schedules is demanded, some ancient sources illustrate its historical roots (Farran, 2004, p. 8). For example, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the poet Hesiod advised his people “do not put off your work until tomorrow and the day after, for the sluggish worker does not fill his bran, nor the one who puts off his work; industry aids work, but the man who puts off work always wrestles with disaster” (as cited in Farran, 2004, p. 9). Shakespeare in his play (Henry VI, part 1) in 1592 warned with deeply premeditated lines, “defer no time, delays have dangerous ends” (Farran, 2004, p. 8). Moreover, Philip Stanhope, the Earl of Chesterfield, wrote a letter to his son advising “no idleness, no laziness, no procrastination; never put off till tomorrow what you can do today” (as cited in Farran, 2004, p. 9).

These historical quotations indicate that procrastination existed in the past and played an important role in human experience, observable from Hesiod and from ancient Greek times many years before the time of Socrates. In light of this evidence, this behavioral pattern is clearly not a “modern malady” as Milgram (1991) views it.

### ***Procrastination as an academic construct***

Procrastination, unlike other psychological phenomena, which have an almost concrete definition, appears to evoke different constructs and connotations for different people. However, for the purpose of this study, it is important to give proper academic consideration to procrastination and to provide a clear account of its basic nature.

A review of the literature shows considerable differences in definition. According to Farran (2004), these variations are “subjective definitions of procrastination, resulting in the lack of a commonly accepted conceptualization of the behavior” (p. 10). Solomon and Rothblum (1984) see academic procrastination as a deliberate act of delaying tasks to the extent of experiencing “subjective” anxiety. Similarly, Heward (2010) and Rabin, Fogel and Nutter-Upham (2011) view it as a voluntary and needless delay in academic activities in spite of knowing the possible negative ramifications of postponement. Although these definitions are generally considered as the most comprehensive account of the phenomenon, they focus mainly on associating procrastination with one, relatively limited, dimension: irrational action.

Unlike previous definitions that emphasize the irrational component, other investigators offer a more judgmental definition. For instance, Wolters (2003) says it is “knowing that one is supposed to, and perhaps even wanting to, complete an academic task but failing to perform the activity within the expected or desired time frame” (p. 179). Similarly, procrastination has also been referred to as the lack of a “self-regulated” performance and the tendency to postpone or to keep away from carrying out

the activities under someone's authority or control (Chu & Choi, 2005; Lee, 2005). These two views suggest there is interference from some factors that stop students from keeping to schedules. These can be lack of skills or knowledge and inability to make decisions, as seen in Wolters' (2003) definition, or lack of time management and other factors, examined in this study in a separate section.

Regardless of the different dimensions considered above, researchers' previous definitions still share a negative view of procrastination, which regards delay as "self-handicapping" and "dysfunctional". However, Chu and Choi (2005) address the possibility of a positive perspective. They distinguish between two kinds of procrastination: active and passive. They consider active procrastination as students' ability to act on their decisions in a timely manner (Chu & Choi, 2005, p. 247). They procrastinate, yes, but they "suspend their actions deliberately and focus their attention on other important tasks at hand" (Chu & Choi, 2005, p. 247). This view supports Ferrari's (1994) contention that procrastination can be characterized as a functional behavioral pattern. This represents acceptable behavior, which may help students to increase the likelihood of producing good academic work, such as wisely waiting for more comprehensive information before starting to act. Hence, it can be perceived that students with positive procrastination are similar to those who do not procrastinate in terms of purposeful outcomes (Farran, 2004).

Collectively, these perspectives provide a clear understanding of the different dimensions of academic procrastination. Although Farran (2004) thinks that they come from investigators' subjective impressions, different perspectives play an important role in maximizing people's understanding of this phenomenon in a more objective way.

### ***The effects of academic procrastination on students***

What are the potential consequences of academic procrastination? Does it affect merely academic performance or does it go far beyond this? Since it is regarded as a prevalent behavior, many investigations of its effects are described. Most findings associate negative effects with it. Rothblum, Solomon and Murakami (1986) remark that the personal and practical problems which result from dysfunctional procrastination are particularly acute in academic settings, as the tendency to put off school-related tasks results in problematic levels of stress. This can be detrimental to students' academic performance, even causing them to fail to complete a course successfully. Lee (2005) supports these results by showing that "procrastination [is] a significant negative predictor of college grade point average" (p. 16). Equally, Wolters (2003) sees procrastination as fairly commonplace behavior, especially among college students, which may lead to undesirable effects on achievement and learning. For instance, it may contribute to "missing or late assignments, cramming, anxiety during tests, giving up studying when more alternatives are available and by and large poor achievements on tests and activities" (p. 179). Overall, these studies link academic procrastination to

negative effects in academic settings, resulting in low efficiency, decreased productivity, and inferior performance.

Procrastination has also been associated with negative affective and health outcomes. To illustrate, while occasional delays can be acceptable, problematic procrastination is not. Problematic delay can be noticed when students experience “internal subjective discomfort” (Rabin, Fogel, & Nutter-Upham, 2011, p. 344). This uneasiness may cause higher levels of stress as a result of inability to meet a deadline, anxiety, depression and regret.

Although most of the literature has associated detrimental outcomes with procrastination, some studies show that this behavior can provoke short-term benefits. For instance, Tice and Baumeister (1997) have found that procrastinators, compared with non-procrastinators, have less discomfort and anxiety and better physical health when the task has to be submitted far ahead of a deadline. In this sense, procrastination can be seen as “a strategy that they use to regulate negative emotions, thereby making the individuals feel better, at least temporarily” (Chu & Choi, 2005, p. 344). Thus, if a student completes the academic task before the deadline or slightly after it, it is not necessary that the effectiveness of the task will be negatively affected.

In the same vein, Knaus (2000) argues that not all types of postponement lead to negative results. For example, procrastination that results from time being used for planning and waiting for additional information can be beneficial. Some people allege that they can finish a task on time even if they start to work on it at the last moment. They claim that such a situation pushes them to work faster and better, and reignites the spark of their creativity, as working under pressure makes them come up with creative ideas. So, it seems that there is a possibility of having another kind of procrastination with which positive outcomes can be associated (Farran, 2004).

To sum up, results demonstrate that while delays can bring short-term benefits to health, these positive outcomes will be reversed when the semester progresses and the deadlines come nearer. So, across the semester, the cumulative impact of procrastination on health removes the potential benefits of delay (Farran, 2004, p. 30). Furthermore, students who procrastinate end up producing inferior academic work compared to non-procrastinators.

### ***Factors causing student procrastination***

Researchers (Rabin, Fogel, & Nutter-Upham, 2011; Chu & Choi, 2005) have proposed different variables as possible predictors of procrastination. However, most assessments have focused largely on study habit measurements, including study attitudes, time spent studying, and lessons completed in self-paced instruction courses (Solomon & Rothblum, 1984). Yet procrastination goes far beyond the lack of time management and study skills noted by many researchers. Many different factors are involved.

Several demographic and psychiatric/medical factors have been examined to see if they correlate with procrastination. Researchers (e.g., Rabin, Fogel, & Nutter-Upham, 2011), however, cannot agree conclusively about a relationship with gender. Likewise, there is no indication of a meaningful relationship with students' age. Nor is there an apparent correlation between level of intelligence and ethnicity. But students facing certain issues, such as "drug and alcohol problems, learning disabilities and attentional problems" (Rabin, Fogel, & Nutter-Upham, 2011, p. 345) seem to show a higher level of procrastination.

However, studies on underlying traits, such as personality and emotional, cognitive and motivational aspects, have associated them with procrastination. With regard to personality features, procrastination has been specifically linked to Costa and McCrae's (1992) Five Factor Model (FFM), according to which it is negatively correlated with conscientiousness because this quality "entails personality traits that are contrary to procrastination behaviors such as deliberation, dutifulness, and high striving for achievement" (Heward, 2010, p.7). In addition, it is noted that neurosis also relates to this phenomenon; but, unlike conscientiousness, the relation is a positive one and there are many traits found among procrastinators, including low self-handicapping, self-esteem and depression. The third factor, which is extraversion, also shows a positive relationship in that extraverts tend to be "impulsive and seek sensation, which may increase the likelihood to procrastinate" (Heward, 2010, p. 9). Regarding openness to experience and agreeableness, little or no association with procrastination has been found. But, with the "openness" to experience factor there is a significant correlation between procrastination and fantasy. It is suggested that students fantasize to escape from a task's negative implications. Baylis (2005) argues that fantasizing can be either helpful or unhelpful depending on the context of its use. From his study of two groups of young men coming from similar impoverished socio-economic circumstances he draws his conclusions that fantasizing is often a conscious coping mechanism that is deliberately used in the face of real-life challenges rather than being unconscious defense style.

Procrastination is noticed also as a motivational problem. As suggested by Senecal, Koestner and Vallerand (1995), it involves more than deficit time management or laziness trait. Procrastinators are likely to be difficult to motivate and so delay doing assignments until the last minute. They may have "difficulty acquiring new knowledge if steps are not taken to enhance their motivation" (Lee, 2005, p. 6). Procrastinators may also face such problems as fear of failure and perfectionism which make them avoid any negative feedback. Similar to the other causes of procrastination, lack of motivation can increase its prevalence (Lee, 2005). This factor and the multiple causes already mentioned may contribute to a fundamental underlying factor which is a failure of self-regulation.

Lack of self-regulation as a cause of procrastination receives most attention from researchers. Tuckman and Sexton (1990) view procrastination as the absence or low level of self-regulated behavior in which students use external and internal indications to see when to start, when to maintain, and when to finish their “goal-directed” behavior. In other words, such students cannot regulate their own performance and this leads to the late submission of completed tasks. Even if they succeed at times in completing assigned tasks, studies indicate that their own awareness is “skewed and the cognitive load stemming from the amount of information results in fewer tasks completed and more errors in experimental settings” (Heward, 2010, p. 10). These feelings are compounded by time constraints resulting from doing the task at the last possible moment.

To give a fuller picture of the role of self-regulation in procrastination frequency, it is useful to distinguish different forms of motivation and to what degree they can be considered as self-determined. The most important forms of motivation, researchers mention, are as follows: intrinsic motivation; self-determined extrinsic motivation; non-self-determined extrinsic motivation; and demotivation. A study by Lee (2005) aimed to explore the effects of these four forms. He tried also to explore whether flow experience, in which students are absorbed in tasks to the extent of losing self-consciousness and awareness of time, is associated with procrastination. The results indicate that students who are self-determined–satisfied and pleased with carrying out the activity–tend not to procrastinate. However, demotivated students, who cannot control their learning process, have higher levels of procrastination. Although the results indicate that intrinsic motivation and demotivation have unique effects, they “did not contribute significantly to the variance in procrastination when the effects caused by flow experiences were considered” (p. 5).

Taken together, it seems from the existing research that a failure of self-regulation is primarily associated with procrastination. It can be seen that the ability to use time purposefully, produce higher achievements, and display self-efficacy are the key factors which lead to persistence in completing tasks. When self-regulation is depleted, the probability of putting off completion of a task increases.

To recapitulate thus far, academic procrastination has always been there with the students and different factors can be predicted to cause it. As university students encounter multiple tasks, activities and deadlines which need to be met, much of their time is unstructured and unregulated. Hence, they procrastinate. So, as this brings serious consequences, studies have been conducted to identify the key underlying reasons so that suitable interventions can be implemented. The findings of most studies indicate a relationship between academic procrastination and psychological, motivational and self-regulatory factors.

### **Purpose of the study**

The study examined external and internal factors affecting academic procrastination in completing and submitting time-bound academic tasks or assignments from the perspective of English majors at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. The questions addressed were:

1. What kind of association does procrastination have with internal and external factors?
2. What are the behavioral patterns that could be associated with student procrastination?

### **Methodology**

#### ***Participants***

As the study aimed to investigate the factors causing SQU students to procrastinate, the questionnaire was given to only students specializing or majoring in English (N=40). They were enrolled in different English courses and came from varying years at college. Participants comprised 63% female (25) and 37% male (15) students, ranging in age from 20 to 24. Fifty percent were graduating students (20) and 50% undergraduate students (20).

The criteria for selecting these participants for this study were two-fold. Firstly, all the students of English specialization stream had experience of undertaking and doing time-bound tasks and assignments as part of their study requirements. Secondly, it has been a shared knowledge and experience that most of these students procrastinated in completing tasks and assignments in their courses.

#### ***Instrument and data collection procedure***

We jointly developed the questionnaire for this study, duly discussed and revised it prior to administering it the participants. The first section asked each participant to answer demographic questions on their gender, years spent at college, age and specialization. The second section consisted of 29 items provided on a 5-point Likert scale consisting of choices “strongly agree” (1) to “strongly disagree” (5). The items were used to assess the role of motivational, psychological, self-regulated and external factors (including peers, teachers, and the nature of the tasks) in students’ delay in submitting assignments. The third section included two open-ended questions to gain deeper insights into the participants’ beliefs and perceptions about the issues under examination. The first question asked students if they procrastinated or not and the reasons. The second question required from them to provide solutions and suggestions for those who delay addressing academic tasks on time. The questionnaire was validated in terms of item clarity and relevance with the help of three senior faculty members in

English department of the university before it was piloted. In view of their suggestions some items in the questionnaire were revised and some overlaps were removed. To further ascertain the validity of the questionnaire, and to increase its accuracy and reliability, we then piloted it on three students and in the light of the confusion faced by the pilot study participants we decided to rephrase some statements in the questionnaire.

To obtain a satisfactory number of participants, we used a snowball sampling technique, which involved asking students to help the authors to get access to their contemporaries. The technique was followed when distributing the questionnaire for both graduating and undergraduate students. Each student motivated another student (from his/her peer group) and thus we could get forty students (20 graduating and 20 undergraduate) who volunteered to participate in this study. All of them were given the option to take the questionnaire, read and familiarize with the items therein and complete it within a week. After a week we personally contacted the students and collected the duly completed questionnaire. All the students were able to complete all the required entries in the questionnaire fully and without any kind of difficulty.

We used descriptive statistics to investigate the causes that led English majors at SQU to procrastinate in completion and submission of their tasks and assignments in time. For the purposes of analysis and discussion means, percentages and standard deviations were calculated for each of the 29 items of the questionnaire using SPSS. The same statistics were also calculated for the analysis of the two open-ended questions.

## **Results**

For the sake of consistency, the same numbers have been used for each statement in the following tables as they appear in the questionnaire included in the Appendix. Thematically similar statements have been put in each table.

In response to the statements 1 and 29 in the questionnaire, which are related to the existence/non-existence of the issue of procrastination among students, 15 out of 40 students strongly agreed that delaying is one of their problems, as statement 1 in Table 1, "procrastination is one of my problems" received the highest percentage (70 %) falling within 1.3 SD of the mean (3.8). On the other hand, three students (5%) seemed to have no problem with postponement. The result shows that more than half of the sample supported the statement, as can be noticed from the mean (3.8). Their strong position can be clearly justified by looking at their responses to the rest of the statements.

Further, contrary to our prediction, students' response to statement 29 about the frequency of "submitting academic tasks on time" was somewhat more positive. Although more than half of the participants (70%) considered procrastination as one of their problems, almost one third of them did not have a problem with submitting assignments on time. The results are represented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Perspective of students on procrastination and on timely submission*

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	M	Std. Deviation
1. Procrastination is one of my problems.	37.5%	32.5%	7.5%	17.5%	5%	3.8	1.3
29. I always submit my assignments on time.	27.5%	42.5%	7.5%	20%	2.5%	2.45	1.1

It can be seen that most students did indeed procrastinate with assignments. But, when it comes to submission, they showed an ability to finish tasks on time. The problem of students' procrastination can be attributed to internal factors, including self-regulation, psychology and motivation. However, surprisingly, procrastination seemed only relatively related to motivational and self-regulation variables. While the statements that come under the latter factors had the highest mean, the statements on the psychological dimension had the lowest mean.

As Table 2 shows, results from the analysis of student responses to the *self-regulatory components* indicated their poor skills in using strategies for completing assignments on time. As can be inferred from the results of the statements 2, 9 and 10, procrastination is clearly related with students' beliefs regarding their ability to make decisions and manage time properly. Twenty admitted they lacked these two aspects of self-regulated learning while 10 disagreed. Besides, 42.5% expressed disagreement about the purposive use of their time. So, those students who lacked decision-making and time-management strategies were more likely to completing their assignments on time, most probably, for the reasons based on Farran's (2004) claim that such a situation pushes them to work faster and better, and reignites the spark of their creativity, as working under pressure makes them come up with creative ideas.

However, contrary to expectation, the results did not indicate a potential relationship between procrastination and another component of self-regulation, namely, self-efficacy. Half of the participants (50%) indicated that they were able to submit their assignments on time if the help they sought from others was delayed. On the other hand, 37.5% (10% strongly agreed, 27.5% agreed) responded to the statement positively. This can be attributed to the fact that the kind of tasks assigned to the students were not very complicated, as can be noticed from the response to statement 21, which showed that 40% of the students were neutral in their response. The results did not show much about the complexity of the tasks which caused procrastination. As a



result, we presupposed that most students would claim an ability to complete their academic work successfully. Twenty-five percent strongly agreed and 45% agreed with statement number 25, “I am capable of successfully completing the assigned tasks on time” falling within 1.13 SD of the mean (3.7). This can be attributed also to the fact that most students (68%, with a higher mean of 3.6) sought their teachers’ help when facing difficulties in task(s), and half of them claimed no difficulty in working under pressure. Such results support the view of Solomon and Rothblum (1984) that students who usually ask for teachers’ help and tend to work under pressure, when doing assignments, become more confident about completing their work successfully. So, they tend to procrastinate less often than other students.

Table 2

*Perspective of students on time management and assignment submission postponement*

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	M	Std. Deviation
2. I have difficulty in making decisions that is why I postpone submitting assignments.	5%	45%	12.5%	27.5%	10%	3	1.6
9. I manage my time poorly that is why I am often left with little time to do my assignments.	10%	45%	12.5%	30%	2.5%	3.3	1.09
10. I seek help when doing my assignments and when help is delayed it causes me to postpone submission of assignments.	10%	27.5%	12.5%	42.5%	7.5%	2.9	1.19
15. I use my time purposively, so I am always on time when submitting assignments	12.5%	27.5%	17.5%	32.5%	10%	3	1.24
20. I seek the help of teachers in doing	22.5%	45.5%	12.5%	20%	2.5%	3.6	1.12

tasks that I have difficulty with so I often submit on time.							
21. The tasks assigned are too complicated for me to finish on time.	15%	32.5%	40%	12.5%	0%	3.1	1.5
25. I am capable of successfully completing the assigned tasks on time.	25%	45%	12.5%	12.5%	5%	3.7	1.13
26. I tend to work better under pressure therefore I postpone things.	10%	42.5%	12.5%	25%	10%	3.1	1.21

Results also provide evidence, as can be seen in Table 3, that motivational variables can be regarded as key components of self-regulated learning and can be used to understand students' level of academic procrastination. Surprisingly, the results indicated that a sizeable chunk of students focused on completing tasks because of extrinsic reasons. They completed their work punctually to please class friends and professors and to get good marks. As evident from Table 3, 45% of them were less likely to procrastinate in order to please others and 47.5 % to please professors and 77.5% (25% strongly agreed, 52.5% agreed), falling within 1.0012 SD of the mean (3.85), completed tasks to avoid getting a reduced mark. Interestingly, 20% completed tasks on time, positively, to increase their understanding. Thus, those who focused on completing assignments for intrinsic reasons were unlikely to work on their tasks in a timely manner. This could stem from other external factors which may cause them to be mainly focused extrinsically during academic tasks. It is evident that a considerable chunk of participants (11% strongly agreed, 34% agreed) submitted their assignments on time because they were afraid of their professors. This appears to be an interesting finding as it went against mainstream thinking that expects university students to concentrate hard on a mastery-and-performance orientation when doing their work (Lee, 2005). Thus, it can be claimed that not all students who have intrinsic reasons are less likely to procrastinate.

Table 3  
*Perspective of students on motivational variables*

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	M	Std. Deviation
14. I complete tasks on time to please others.	12.5%	32.5%	10.5%	27.5%	15%	2.8	1.13
16. I complete tasks on time to ensure that I don't get a reduced mark.	25%	52.5%	5%	5%	17.5%	3.85	1.0012
17. I don't feel motivated to finish tasks on time when my classmates don't show interest in the assigned activities.	7.5%	45%	12.5%	30%	10%	3	1.21
19. I submit assignments on time to please my professors.	12.5%	35%	20%	30%	2.5%	3.25	1.103
22. I complete tasks on time to increase my understanding.	5%	15%	25%	42.5%	10.5%	2.4	1.03
28. I intentionally put off work to the last minute to maximize my motivation.	2.5%	20%	15%	47.5%	15%	2.47	1.06
23. I submit assignments on time because I am afraid of my professors.	11%	34%	17.5%	21.5%	16%	3.15	1.16

Responses to statements, listed in Table 4, related to the psychological dimension revealed positive results of students' confidence ability. As evident from the table, most students reported that they did not procrastinate as a result of lacking self-confidence

(67.5%) and having fear of failure (62.5%). It is also apparent from students' responses to statements 6 (65%), 11 (58%) and 13 (50%) that they were more likely to complete their assignments on time, without taking risk and waiting till the last minute to do them. Even if the nature of tasks was not appealing to students, they did not delay doing them as is clearly evident from 60% disagreeing with the statement number 12 (35% strongly disagreed and 25% disagreed). This can be associated to most participants' belief that postponing tasks was not their habitual behavior as it is evident from students' response to statement 11 with which 58% disagree (40.5% disagreed and 17.5% agreed). These results provide a definite indication concerning the potential negative association between procrastination and psychological problems students have, which support Wolter's (2003) view that procrastination appears when there are deficiencies on students' psychological dimension, including lacking self-confidence.

As for the external factors, students' responses, as shown in Table 5, show that procrastination is linked with some external reasons. A considerably big chunk of students' tendency to postpone increased when a deadline was not set for them and the tasks were not clear as evident from the positive responses to the statements 8 (47.5%) and 18 (65%) respectively. It can be inferred from the results that students considered setting a deadline as a contributor to tasks completion since 50% did not like to rebel against it. On the other hand, 52.5% of participants were most likely to complete their tasks on time when receiving corrective feedback from their peers and 55% when the tasks are explained by the teachers clearly. These findings corroborate with the effect of self-determined extrinsic motivational aspect of Lee's (2005) study, and suggest that when self-regulation is depleted, here in this case by external factors, the probability of putting off completion of a task increases.

When demographic variables were examined in relation to procrastination, the results indicated no significant differences in students' response with regard to gender. Male and female students mostly shared the same attitudes and their responses were accordingly similar. Likewise, all students, regardless of the time they had spent at SQU, expressed more or less similar view(s). Hence, it can be conceived that different ages did not correlate with procrastination. These results are not surprising as most researchers including Rabin, Fogel and Nutter-Upham (2011), report no such gender and age differences regarding a demographic relationship with procrastination.

Table 4  
*Perspective of students on psychological dimension*

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	M	Std. Deviation
3. I lack self-confidence therefore I tend to delay doing my assignments.	2.5%	17.5%	12.5%	45%	22.5%	2.3	1.09
4. I have fear of failure, which makes me unsure of what is required in an assignment, hence, I procrastinate.	5%	17%	15%	50%	12.5%	2.5	1.08
6. I like risk-taking therefore I postpone submission of assignments on purpose.	7.5%	12.5%	15%	40%	25%	2.37	1.21
11. I voluntarily postpone finishing tasks even if they are important because it has become my habit.	5%	29.5%	7.5%	40.5%	17.5%	2.7	1.24
12. I delay things that I don't like to do.	7.5%	25%	12.5%	25%	35%	2.35	1.27
13. I wait till the last minute to do an assignment because I always think that assignments are not demanding and I can do them in a short time.	7.5%	30%	12.5%	40%	10%	2.95	1.19

Table 5

*Perspective of students on external factors affecting academic procrastination*

Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD	M	Std. Deviation
5. Setting a deadline is one way to control my activities therefore I rebel against control.	7.5%	25%	7.5%	42.5%	7.5%	2.09	1.25
7. I am always influenced by my peers who tend to submit late.	10%	22.5%	17.5%	32.5%	17.5%	2.75	1.27
8. Not all teachers put a deadline for assigned tasks, which makes me put off doing their assignments.	15%	32.5%	12.5%	27.5%	12.5%	2.75	1.31
18. Some tasks are not clear to me, so I postpone them.	12.5%	52.5%	17.5%	10%	7.5%	3.85	1.08
24. My classmates' corrective feedback to my assignments motivates me to complete them on time.	17.5%	35%	22.5%	15%	10%	3.35	1.23
27. Teachers explain the task instruction clearly, so I do tasks on time.	15%	40%	15%	7.5%	22.5%	3.32	.9167

Responses to the first question in the open-ended section indicated that the majority procrastinated. Twenty-eight students (70%) admitted this, while twelve (30%) did not. Those who postponed completing their tasks on time justified this with different reasons. Some said that the tasks given to them were neither interesting nor beneficial,

hence caused them to feel demotivated. Others said that some assignments were vague, leading them to spend a long time on completing them successfully. In addition, 40% justified their tendency to procrastinate by mentioning poor time management. Their answers were predictable and expected, as the results in the first section of the questionnaire showed that a high percentage of students had a problem with managing their time.

As for students who did not procrastinate, 30% agreed that they did not like working under pressure because this produced poor work and thus a reduced mark. Their responses provide extra evidence that students who have a propensity to complete tasks for extrinsic reasons were less likely to procrastinate.

Moving to the second question in the open-ended section, students' answers were surprising, as most of them answered in a similar way. It can be seen from the results that more than three quarters of the sample suggested one obvious solution for those who procrastinate, namely, improving their time management. Although a high percentage appeared to lack this skill, as can be seen from their responses to the second section; they were aware of its importance. They believed that having time management skills would positively affect their academic standing, their capacity to master classroom material, and the quality of their lives.

Most students expressed a willingness to be like 'the early bird that catches the worm', as one student put it, but that they needed more help and guidance from instructors. For example, some suggested that all teachers should set a deadline so that students can plan ahead of time. Others mentioned that some kinds of tasks are particularly needed to match the time allotted so that students would not find themselves working under pressure or left with the task incomplete just one day before the deadline.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

This study has attempted to examine a student perspective on the issue of procrastination in completing and submitting time-bound tasks and assignments. Based on the results found regarding the perceptions and attitudes of English major students at SQU to procrastination, the majority considered it a problem for them, showing that there is a tendency among English majors at SQU to procrastinate. Although most cared about punctual submission, the results suggest that the reasons underlying postponement were mainly associated with self-regulation, motivation, and external factors that may distract students from completing tasks in time even if their intention is to produce good work.

A relatively large group of respondents also had a problem with planning and organizing. Participants' endorsement of items related to self-regulation ranged from 5% to 45%. First, a relatively large group blamed procrastination on poor time management and an inability to make decisions. These results were consistent with many research findings, including Solomon and Rothblum's (1984). This finding,

therefore, suggests the importance of working with students who lack initiative and organizational skills. Efficient strategies are needed to improve these abilities. This might include teaching them how to set proximal sub-goals for their academic tasks and for the amount of effort needed to complete them, as Rabin, Fogel and Nutter-Upham (2011) suggest.

Results also indicated the relevance of intrinsic motivation. Although these findings contradicted many others (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Senecal, Koestner, & Vallerand, 1995), it seemed that most students in the present study completed their tasks to please professors and avoid getting a reduced mark. On the other hand, the minority, who did so for intrinsic reasons, were more likely to procrastinate. This suggests that students may not have a close relationship with their professors, as the majority expressed a fear of them. Besides, they had a problem with the kinds of tasks given, which they viewed as boring, non-beneficial and demotivating. Consequently, they either completed them merely for the external reasons mentioned above or delayed doing so if they were not graded or required. Thus, the results provided useful insights into how teachers might reduce students' procrastination. Psychologically speaking, procrastination was most clearly related to students' beliefs regarding their ability to complete tasks on time. In particular, findings showed that students had confidence in their ability to complete their tasks successfully, which supports prior studies showing that students who are confident in their capacities are likely to postpone less often than their diffident colleagues (Ferrari, Parker, & Ware, 1992; Wolters, 2003).

Analysis of the potential relationship between procrastination and external factors yielded significant results. The authors observed that procrastination increased when tasks were unclear and lacked set deadlines. Besides, peers were shown to play an important influential part in either making students delay or complete their academic work on time. This lends support to our third hypothesis that some behavioral patterns may emerge from students' perspective on academic procrastination.

The study found no significant relationship between gender differences and procrastination. Similarly, there was no meaningful correlation between procrastination and age. These results support the findings of most studies which are inconclusive about the relevance of gender and age on this issue (Rabin, Fogel, & Nutter-Upham, 2011).

### **Limitations and directions for further research**

There are a couple of limitations worth highlighting after we highlighted some definite conclusions. Firstly, the results of this study were obtained from a small sample size of 40 from only one university. Future studies may involve a considerably bigger sample size involving students from more than one university for more generalizable results and findings. Furthermore, a more comprehensive study, incorporating a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach, may replicate these findings and further augment the insights and patterns obtained by the surveys. Moreover, it would be important to



consider teachers' input on the topic using interviews. Another potential study might include an analysis of the data obtained from the incoming and outgoing generation of students of the department to examine the differences and similarities in the variables. Undertaking a study to assess the differences between the other foreign language learner groups, that is, comparing and contrasting Students of Arts major and Science major may also be considered. At first glance these students might share some of the similar characteristics of the participants in this study but further research might elucidate comparable findings that might help generalize to other ethnic generations of learners. These data will be helpful in carefully constructing modified versions of motivational theories applied to second language learning.

Secondly, the findings and approaches to deal with the problem of procrastination, reported in this study, were merely based on a reflection of personal perceptions, beliefs and attitudes of students. Intervention studies investigating the effectiveness of these proposed approaches can be conducted to provide stronger empirical evidence as to whether a systematic training that focuses more on helping procrastinating students to develop a better sense and capability of taking responsibility and dealing with timely completion of tasks and assignments were effective.

### **Implications for practice**

This study on examining the issue of academic procrastination from the student perspective documents the importance of reviewing the phenomenon of procrastination as it pertains to some pedagogically important learning issues, namely, learning by doing, guided completion of tasks, and learner independence. Furthermore, this study indicates that educators need to be cognizant of and attend to the issues of students' attitudes, desire and motivation to learn and complete their tasks and assignments as they progress through their major courses. A practical suggestion for interventions would be to incorporate positive reinforcement strategies tied to task completion and provide motivational aspects in language learning and competence development in the content areas. In particular, intervention might be successful if it focuses on increasing students' ability to set reasonable expectations about the amount of effort and time needed to complete their tasks. At the same time, efforts should be made to help students engage in assignments that bring motivation, pleasure and satisfaction. This might be achieved by designing more appealing tasks and helping students to concentrate on the task itself rather than on extrinsic factors.

In view of the root causes of procrastination, time management workshops and training both on the part of students and teachers and motivational strategies of discussing success stories of makers and finders rooted in continuous hard work and timely use of time will be fruitful for building awareness of the importance of diligence and proper utilization of time for educational purposes. The findings of this study can be helpful for students themselves and for teachers and other stakeholders in order to

facilitate proper management of procrastinating students for developing a better sense and capability of taking responsibility and dealing with timely completion and submission of tasks and assignments. These findings also point to the fact that educators must be proactive in providing evidence-based language and content learning procedures and promote elevated levels of effort in task completion, stronger attitudes towards learning, and much more elevated levels of integrative motivation to learn English and content knowledge. These, as Gardener (1985; 2001) and Gardener, Masgoret, Tennant, & Mihic (2004) assert, are fundamental to the learning process and, we are of a strong conviction that these are also fundamental to one's quest to develop, grow, excel and contribute.

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## Appendix: The questionnaire

Sultan Qaboos University  
College of Arts and Social Sciences  
Department of English

### A Questionnaire on the Factors Causing Sultan Qaboos University Students to Procrastinate Doing Academic Assignments

This study aims to find out the factors that lead SQU students to procrastinate when having to submit their assignments. Kindly spend a few minutes answering this questionnaire. Please be assured that the data will be used only for research purposes and will be treated with confidentiality. I sincerely appreciate your assistance and thank you very much for your participation.

#### A: Background information

Please fill in the blanks.

1. Gender: .....
2. Year(s) spent at College: .....
3. Age: .....
4. Specialization: .....

B: Please respond to the following statements by placing a tick where applicable.

1. **SA**: Strongly Agree, 2. **A**: Agree, 3. **N**: Neutral, 4. **D**: Disagree, 5. **SD**: Strongly Disagree

The Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
1. Procrastination is one of my problems.					
2. I have difficulty in making decisions and that is why I postpone submitting assignments.					
3. I lack self-confidence therefore I tend to delay doing my assignments.					
4. I have fear of failure, which makes me unsure of what is required in an assignment, hence, I procrastinate.					
5. Setting a deadline is one way to control my activities therefore I rebel against control.					

6. I like risk-taking therefore I postpone submission of assignments on purpose.					
7. I am always influenced by my peers who tend to submit late.					
8. Not all teachers set a deadline for assigned tasks, which makes me put off doing them.					
9. I manage my time poorly and that is why I am often left with little time to do my assignments.					
10. I seek help when doing my assignments and when help is delayed it causes me to postpone submission of assignments.					
11. I voluntarily postpone finishing tasks even if they are important because it has become my habit.					
12. I delay things that I don't like to do.					
13. I wait till the last minute to do an assignment because I always think that assignments are not demanding and I can do them in a short time.					
14. I complete tasks on time to please others.					
15. I use my time purposively, so I am always on time when submitting assignments.					
16. I complete tasks on time to ensure that I don't get a reduced mark.					
17. I don't feel motivated to finish tasks on time when my classmates don't show interest in the assigned activities.					
18. Some tasks are not clear to me, so I postpone them.					
19. I submit assignments on time to please my professors.					
20. I seek the help of teachers in doing tasks that I have difficulty with so I often submit on time.					
21. The tasks assigned are too complicated for me to finish on time.					
22. I complete tasks on time to increase my understanding.					
23. I submit assignments on time because I am afraid of my professors.					
24. My classmates' corrective feedback on my assignments motivates me to complete them on time.					
25. I am capable of successfully completing the assigned tasks on time.					
26. I tend to work better under pressure and therefore I postpone things.					

27. Teachers explain the task instruction clearly, so I do tasks on time.					
28. I intentionally put off work to the last minute to maximize my motivation.					
29. I always submit my assignments on time.					

C: Do you procrastinate? Yes

No

If Yes, why?

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.....

.....

.....

If No, why?

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.....

D: Can you suggest any solutions or give any advice for people who postpone doing tasks on time?

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### Note on Contributors

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## **Academic and Prestige: Indonesian Lecturers' Attitudes towards TOEFL**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates the attitudes of the Indonesian lecturers who teach English language towards TOEFL, one of the high stake tests originally used to measure English proficiency for those who aspire to study in North American universities. Employing interview as a tool for data collection, the findings suggest that the lecturers hold positive attitudes towards TOEFL in general and towards the policy of requiring TOEFL for thesis assessments in their department. They also perceived TOEFL as solely adopting American norms and therefore there should be other tests that best reflect the need for communicating English as an International language. The participants' preference of English tests is those of native varieties, especially for academic purposes. However, there is a possibility that if Indonesian people recognize their Indonesian variety of English, TOEFL will no longer be needed.

Keywords: TOEFL, EIL (English as an International Language), proficiency, assessment, testing, language varieties.

### **Introduction**

The emergence of new varieties of English in the world today affects the perceptions towards the standard varieties of English (i.e. Standard British or North American). Rather than debating on whose variety we should adopt, whether "native" or "non-native", the focus has shifted to understanding how speakers use English in their daily communication. This implicates various aspects of teaching and learning including testing and assessments. The aim of this study is to delineate the issues arising towards TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) as one of the high-stake tests in relation to testing English for internal purposes and intercultural communication in Indonesia. It is surprising to note that there have not been many studies investigating the perceptions and attitudes of teachers or lecturers who teach English from Kachru's (1985) perspective of expanding circle nations regarding English language testing particularly the suitability of adopting TOEFL to assess students' English language proficiencies. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the lecturer's attitudes regarding this issue and their views regarding the employment of English as an International Language as the basis for evaluating the students' English language skills.



### **English language development in Indonesia**

According to Yuwono (2005), English was first taught during Dutch colonization, when a number of Indonesian scholars received Dutch education. After Indonesian independence in 1945, English was established by the government as the independent nation's first foreign language (Lowenberg, 1991). Furthermore, as Lowenberg points out that since 1956, the United States has provided opportunities to Indonesian scholars to study in U.S. This program, according to Lowenberg, has been one of the most important influences on the spread of English in Indonesia. In the 1960s, Tanner (1967) argued English was accepted in Indonesia as "the mark of the well-educated man, a symbol of the new elite" (p. 34). This view is still held among Indonesians and provides the motivation for Indonesians to learn English. To be seen as a well-educated person is a pride and when one can speak English in Indonesia, it seems that other people will automatically assume that he or she is more knowledgeable and advanced (Lowenberg, 1991).

Indonesia is identified as one of the countries in Kachru's (1986) Expanding Circle where English functions as a "foreign language" with mainly international roles but few in-country uses (Lowenberg 2002). However, as English is also seen as a global language and provides many opportunities for people to find better jobs across their countries. As such the Indonesian government has gradually become aware of the importance of English and they have begun to encourage more people to learn English. Indonesia is now attempting to globalize the country by stipulating primary schools to include English as an obligatory subject and applying bilingual class in many state secondary schools (Depdiknas, 2003).

The government's awareness of English learning can be confirmed with reference to the existence of English subject introduced in elementary schools since 1994 (Listia & Sirajuddin, 2008) and that since 2003, it has become a compulsory subject for Indonesian elementary schools (Depdiknas, 2003). However, as the Indonesian government revised the 2013/2014 curriculum, English now is an elective subject in elementary schools (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013). This obviously means that there will be no sanction for the schools to eliminate English as a previously compulsory subject. In this case, according to Musliar Kasim, the vice minister of Education and Culture (as cited in Prasetyo, 2013), making English an elective subject prevents the students from being taught by incompetent English teachers, especially in suburban areas. Kasim argued that by having unqualified English teachers, the students' future will be negatively impacted. This situation apparently assures that acquiring English is essential in Indonesia and that it must be guided by qualified teachers.

Despite this, at the level of university, English is only studied for an average of 2 hours on a weekly basis for a minimum of one year (Lowenberg, 1991) although the government stipulates that English is a required subject for all university students

(Government Regulation No. 19, Peraturan Pemerintah Republik Indonesia, 2005). In some Indonesian faculties including the university in the present study, more hours are allocated for English emphasizing the impact of the globalization particularly the Economics and Medicine faculties. Furthermore, many public and private companies in Indonesia presently require English as one of the conditions to procure employment such as recruitment offices, judiciary offices and other institutions. Investments from foreign companies have increased in Indonesia and their preferences are to employ English-speaking workers. Such preconditions further encourage Indonesians to learn English for a better future. As a consequence, English is now taught in many educational institutions from primary to tertiary levels, either in the public or private funded ones.

### **TOEFL in Indonesia**

TOEFL is frequently used as a standard assessment to determine students' English proficiency skills. Many universities in Indonesia currently include the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) as one of main requirements for enrolment and graduation. Some top universities conduct the actual paper-based TOEFL and especially TOEFL ITP (Institutional Testing Program). TOEFL ITP is the type of TOEFL that is mostly used in Indonesia. It consists of multiple choice questions that assess three skills: Listening, Structure and Written Expressions, and Reading. However, because the cost of sitting for TOEFL is financially burdensome for most Indonesian students, some universities have to develop their own version of language assessment that matches with the TOEFL items in terms of degrees of difficulties and content. Hence, TOEFL-equivalent is generally termed to refer to TOEFL-based tests under the internal supervision of the pertinent universities in which the tested items are labeled to be similar to those in the original TOEFL.

The policy of requiring TOEFL in Indonesian universities has been implemented to motivate the students to compete in this era of globalization. Besides supporting the spread of English in Indonesia, the policy is implemented as a method to attract students' enrolment in the universities. With English required as a university's entrance requirement, it gives the image of prestige to the top performing universities. It is required for students from this study's university, especially the ones from the English Department of Teacher Training and Education Faculty to make the grade in the TOEFL tests or face the consequences of being barred from graduating.

With TOEFL positioned as the main proficiency assessment instrument for English language, the target variety is either British or American English which has dominated the teaching and learning system in Indonesia. When the schools chose American textbooks in teaching English, for example, then they were expected to use the American variety with all norms, grammatically and lexically (Dardjowidjojo, 2000). Dardjowidjojo indicates that although Indonesia has alternated between the traditional-

grammar based teaching methods with communicative-based curriculum, the points of departure in the guidelines were still structural. Because of the grammar orientation in the syllabus, students were not able to perform well due to unfamiliarity with the structural items in English. This condition was also mentioned as the major reason for the failure of English language teaching in Indonesia.

It is not surprising that until now, many schools still adhere to the traditionally native varieties in the process of teaching and testing the language. An indication of this is that TOEFL is chosen to represent the standard measurement in deciding one's English competence. Hence, only the varieties from the inner circle have been promoted and tolerated among the Indonesians (Dardjowidjojo, 2000). There does not seem to be an alternative available to the Indonesians because there has been a lack of research to affirm that Indonesia has its own variety of English comparable to Singaporean or Malaysian Englishes. This further enhances the significance given to native speaking models and positions the situation in Indonesia, which is synonymous with the concept of what Phillipson (1992) refers as "linguistic imperialism", defined as "ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial between groups which are defined on the basis of language" (Phillipson, 1992, p. 47). It is clear from the dependency on language resources from the inner circle countries that linguistic imperialism still exists in Indonesia. Phillipson has projected this further through the term "educational imperialism" which manifests itself when the professionalism of the inner circle countries is shadowed by the countries in the expanding circle. Rooted in colonialism and consistent with the concept of hegemony, Phillipson argues that the elites in society have strong connections with the inner circle having been educated in the inner circle nations. The ideological manipulation of perceiving that following the Western ideology as "natural" and "common sense" motivates the direction of English language education in Indonesia. Khan (2009) supports this by arguing that "it is through hegemony that countries located in the "inner circle" become providers of professional expertise and norms for teaching English to speakers of other languages" (p.191).

### **TOEFL and issues of biasedness**

TOEFL is one example of the preference for inner-circle varieties in English language assessment. Wiggin (1979) commented during her teaching tenure in Indonesia that it was surprising to find that passing TOEFL was the noble goal of teaching English in the Indonesian institution where she was positioned to teach. Other preferred English tests in Indonesia are IELTS and TOEIC, or those that are developed from the inner varieties. However, issues have been raised regarding this choice of English language assessment. Khan (in Sharifian, 2009) emphasizes that assessment as an aspect of language education should focus on a global view in order to promote English as an International

Language. She also supports the belief that TOEFL is biased against individuals who may be proficient in using English for international communication but are not exposed to certain varieties of English such as in the case of TOEFL which is standard American English (Davies, Hamp-Lyons, & Kemp, 2003; Jenkins, 2006).

TOEFL is mostly used in many second and foreign language contexts such as in Saudi Arabia (Khan, 2009) and Indonesia to measure students' proficiency for university admission. While in Saudi Arabia TOEFL scores are used to only determine student admission into higher educational institutions, TOEFL is viewed in Indonesia as a precondition to graduate from universities in addition to being used as an instrument of student placement in universities. In other words, these scores are used as gatekeeping measures that allow or deny access and progression to educational sectors.

In Indonesia, the teachers and the lecturers are surprised to find their students who they know speak English quite fluently but do not successfully obtain a satisfying TOEFL score. Davies et al. (2003) and Jenkins (2006) argue that TOEFL is biased against individuals who may be proficient in using English for international communication of English but are not exposed yet to certain nuances of an inner-circle variety of English. Kim (2006, p. 36) further states that Korean students who wish to become English teachers are likely to be frustrated "with the discrepancy between what they use in real situations and what they are tested on" because Korean students use Korean English in their speech communities but are often evaluated in terms of standard American English for employment purposes. As such there have been calls to reconsider the interpretation and use of scores in international English language proficiency tests such as TOEFL particularly in specific contexts such as in denying educational and occupational progression for prospective candidates.

Lowenberg (2002) indicates that the popular perception in English proficiency assessment is that "the appropriate norms for Standard English Usage around the world are those that are accepted and followed by educated native speakers of English" (p. 351). Lowenberg further argues that this assumption has forwarded a presumed awareness that international validity of English proficiency tests are based solely on native speaker norms, especially those of Americans. However, Lowenberg also claims that this assumption is no longer valid in Kachru's (1986) perspective of outer circle countries of English where widespread nativized innovation have developed, but remain existing in the nations of Expanding circles, such as Indonesia where little nativization occurs. Clyne and Sharifian (as cited in Elder & Harding, 2008) also argue that:

In many contexts, people who take language tests such as IELTS and TOEFL use English for intercultural communication, often in the absence of "native" speakers. In such cases, we believe the test should try to evaluate intercultural communicative skills instead of obsessively testing the "inner circle" Englishes. (p. 34)

For most Indonesian students, opportunities to communicate with native speakers from the inner circle country are much less than that to native speakers of the outer circle or other non-native speakers within Asia. Hill (as cited in Davies, et al., 2003) comments:

The majority of Indonesian learners will use English to communicate with other non-native speakers within South-East Asia. For this reason, it was decided the test should emphasize the ability to communicate effectively in English as it is used in the region, rather than relate proficiency to the norms of America, Britain or Australia.... this approach also aims to recognize the Indonesian variety of English both as an appropriate model to be provided by teachers and as a valid target for learners. (p. 574)

Facing the reality that TOEFL does not meet the needs of people from various nations, it is vital to develop tests in English according to local norms when the objective is the need to assess one's competence to use English as a second language in the local community (Canagarajah, 2006). In light of this, Jenkins (2006) argues that EIL is a means of communication amongst English language users in any countries from all Kachru's (1986) concentric circles. Therefore, she suggests that the tests should be based on evidence from interaction rather than persisting one or two typical varieties of English that may not represent the English used by the majority of its speakers. However, in order to move forward with these recommendations, the perceptions of the decision makers are important in determining whether TOEFL would continue to function as a validating proficiency barometer in Indonesia or otherwise. Hence, the aim of this study is discover Indonesian lecturers' views on the use of TOEFL in measuring students' English language proficiency.

### **Research Objectives**

The paper elaborates how the lecturers perceive TOEFL in general and the TOEFL-equivalent as a pre-condition to graduate. It is interesting to discover how the lecturers perceive TOEFL as a language proficiency assessment as it will have a wide impact across the program as well as to the students' learning. Their responses will have an impact on the future of teaching English as an International language as a new paradigm in the language teaching such as the possibility of changing the policy of maintaining TOEFL as the requirement to graduate from the university and replacing it with another appropriate English test based on student' need. Furthermore, positive responses marked by their support to this paradigm could be seen as an indicator for creating a better language learning environment for the students because there will be reduction in adherence to the "native" English speakers' rules in learning English. On the other

hand, negative reactions may signal that the teaching learning based-on native variety rule will keep continuing at least in this institution.

The study examined Indonesian lecturers' attitudes towards TOEFL as one of the high stake tests based on inner-circle varieties. The two questions addressed in this research are:

1. What are the attitudes of the Indonesian lecturers towards TOEFL in general?
2. To what extent do the lecturers agree that students need TOEFL after graduating from the University?

### **Methodology**

Lecturers were chosen to be the subject of this research to find out the perspectives and reaction from the educators about the inner circle-based language testing performed in their institution. Furthermore, they are in a good position to influence any policy concerning either teaching or testing in the English Department within the faculty. They are also directly responsible to develop any appropriate and meaningful teaching and testing materials in which the students can benefit from learning English. In other words, what their views of TOEFL will probably reflect continuity of the test genre in this institution.

More students from this university chose to be English teachers within the province after graduating. Hence, it is interesting to find out whether there is a significant reason for selecting TOEFL as one of the main criteria of determining students' capability in English. To gain this perspective, it is then valuable to have an insight into the lecturers' attitudes towards TOEFL either the actual one as tested in many educational institutions in Indonesia or its equivalent as tested in the researched Indonesian university since it is constructed to test the same skills as in the actual TOEFL.

We have applied purposive sampling in this study in choosing the participants to be involved. In order to obtain more reliable data, we selected those lecturers who have previously taken TOEFL. Fourteen lecturers (7 male and 7 female) participated in this study. This gender balance was coincidental and not predetermined by the researchers since their participation in this study was voluntary, and the lecturers could withdraw at any time prior to or during the interview sessions. Most of the lecturers obtained their postgraduate degrees in English speaking countries, such as Australia, USA and UK. This qualification, we believed could be an advantage for the study since they have been exposed to the inner circle varieties of English where TOEFL is mostly the prerequisite for entering the universities in those countries. Of the 14 lecturers, seven of them obtained their postgraduate qualifications, either Masters or PhD or both, in Australia, while the other two acquired their Masters in USA and UK respectively. All ethical considerations regarding participant selection were adhered to so as to maintain confidentiality. For instance, the participants in this research were identified as L1 to L14 and other obvious details that could identify the participants were removed. Prior to

the interview, the lecturers were given consent forms to be signed and they were informed that their participation in the interview was voluntary and they could withdraw at any point of the research as they wished.

One-to-one interviews were conducted to obtain personal perceptions towards the issues identified within the questions. In order to expand information from the participants, this study employed open-ended interview formats. There were 18 main questions in the interview. Each interview lasted for between 45-60 minutes and was audio-taped. The interviews were then transcribed and shown to the participants for verification and additional comments were added. Some comments from the interview have been edited for clarity.

## **Results**

The results can be divided into two sections: (i) the significant roles of TOEFL in testing English proficiencies, and (ii) the students' need for TOEFL in the English Department. The first section reflects how the participants react to TOEFL by describing these issues:

- The strengths of TOEFL;
- TOEFL as a standard test to measure English competence; and
- TOEFL as a standard test in academic settings.

The second part of the data analysis focused on the participants' perspectives towards how TOEFL is applied in the department they are teaching. They responded on the basis of the following features:

- TOEFL score and study achievement; and
- TOEFL and its advantages for the students' future.

### ***The strengths of TOEFL***

Although the majority of the participants agreed that TOEFL is a test with a high level of difficulty, they argued that it has positive features. Ten participants thought that TOEFL is quite difficult particularly for the beginner learners of English because it is especially designed for advanced learners. From the interview, L3 commented:

It's quite difficult because I think TOEFL is for advanced learners. So, the questions are not really easy, particularly for listening and reading. (L3)

Listening and reading are considered to be the most difficult parts according to some of the participants who maintained that TOEFL is a difficult test. Some stated that

listening was simply difficult because the speakers in the tape speak fast with some unknown vocabularies and the time to choose the given answers is limited:

For listening [TOEFL is difficult] because the speed or the recording are very fast and also the terms used sometimes are not familiar and then we tend not to really concentrate on listening so by the time we need to answer the questions, we miss the information. (L3)

Advanced level of vocabularies used is also believed to be the reasons for the complexity in the reading section, especially when its content reflects American history. L1 supported this view by stating that:

In reading it's a very difficult one. Because I think there are many unknown vocabularies. And secondly, sometimes I don't understand the text, it is often related to history or something like that because I do not have the background knowledge to it. Sometimes it's about history of America. When they ask vocabulary in the texts, although we can guess the vocabulary, but it's still a bit tricky. Sometimes we know the words in general but when we see the words in the context that's very difficult. (L1)

The other four participants varied in perceiving the level of difficulty in TOEFL. One of them suggested that TOEFL is not very difficult especially compared to other tests such as IELTS. Others believed that TOEFL depends on the person's level of proficiency. If a student is competent then TOEFL shall be considered easy, a position indicated by L10:

It depends on the ability or competence of your English. If your English is good than TOEFL test is considered easy. (L10)

Some participants viewed that TOEFL has its strengths. L2 defended that TOEFL is a well-known, reliable and trustworthy test and that it produces a quick result, especially the paper-based TOEFL which consists of only multiple choices:

Because it is a reliable test, right! It is a trustworthy test, so we need to have a test that will produce a quick result and then everybody trusts it and TOEFL is the answer. (L2)

It seems that affordability is also a factor to be considered when choosing the assessment tool for English. L6 argued that until the present time, TOEFL is the most



popular and the most inexpensive test compared to other inner circle-based language testing such as IELTS:

TOEFL is the most flexible to administer, the most inexpensive one and it is still standardized. So far what I know is that TOEFL is simple to administer, flexible...the correction score is not as difficult as IELTS. I think that I agree because so far it is the most flexible, the most popular, and the cheapest. We have institutional TOEFL of course. If it is international of course it is more expensive. Maybe it would be good if IELTS has institutional IELTS, then it can become cheaper. (L6)

### ***TOEFL as a standard test to measure English competence***

TOEFL is perceived as a good assessment instrument to measure English proficiency. All of the participants indicated similar attitudes regarding the main purpose of TOEFL. One of the participants even recognized TOEFL as

... one of the good tests, where TOEFL can really measure almost correctly one's level of English proficiency. (L13)

This attitude may be related to the fact that Indonesia still does not have tests that can measure one's level of proficiency like TOEFL. L13 further argues that TOEFL:

... can measure both spoken and written. Even though I have never taken speaking test but mostly when someone who gain high score like 550 or 600, I believe he/she can speak fluently, it's the same with writing, I mean TOEFL is quite reliable and valid in figuring out those two skills.

The participants agreed that TOEFL can measure English competence, especially three sections commonly tested such as listening, reading and structure. In addition, TOEFL is trusted as a test that measures both the productive and receptive skills in the language, as reflected by L6:

TOEFL is a test to assess somebody's ability in understanding spoken and written texts. So, it's more in testing receptive skills. In general, TOEFL test is a test to measure a person's readiness to follow a study, especially a postgraduate study. (L6)

### ***TOEFL as a standard test in academic setting***

The majority of the participants underwent TOEFL for academic purposes. Out of 14 participants, 12 participants used TOEFL to continue their studies, especially when

applying for a scholarship or to enter a sandwich program in an external institution. Two participants maintained that TOEFL is a tool to discover their level of English proficiency and that it is a standard test suitable for the academia. Thus, it is used to measure a person's academic English as stated by L2, L3, and L14:

As a standard for measuring English in academic setting, I think TOEFL is still important, but for other reasons I don't think TOEFL is a good test to measure someone's ability in English. (L3)

TOEFL tests a person's academic ability because in the test, there are some questions or some test items which do not only judge the ability of their English but also their ability in their academic. (L14)

Furthermore, L12 also stated that for academic settings, the English being used should be either General American or Standard British English:

If we talk about academic, about the accuracy I think we still need the standard. If it is for academic purposes, I still hope there is standard for that maybe British or American, for example, for academic life in university. But if it is for leisure activity for example, for travelling I think any accent would be accepted. (L12)

Some of the participants stated that TOEFL is suitable for those who continue their study at postgraduate level especially in English speaking country:

In my opinion, the purpose of TOEFL is more on measuring someone's proficiency in term of academic English. So I think TOEFL is only suitable for those who are going to continue their study especially in English speaking countries. (L4)

However, some participants argued that the primary reasons why universities in Indonesia require the students to take TOEFL are for academic purposes and to assess their preparedness to further their studies. L6 and L9 commented that:

I think the main purpose why TOEFL is applicable in Indonesia is that it is for education. If somebody wants to pursue a master's program, he should be able to understand English, speak English. So, he should be able to take the minimum score for TOEFL, even in Indonesia. (L9)

TOEFL suits the academic environment because it helps the students in some scholastic activities such as reading and writing textbooks written in English and also participating in lectures. For instance, L12 stated that:

TOEFL is for the university students to read textbooks, to join the lectures presented by the professor, to write in English, to make the international communities able to read, and to understand what we are writing. (L12)

This is further echoed by L10 who also assumed that apart from helping students with their further study, TOEFL will also play a part in assisting them to access information, communicate with foreign students and help students gain more knowledge:

Yes, I think student whose TOEFL score is high will have good access to get in touch with outside world in terms of accessing the internet, getting in touch with other students in foreign country. So, it is very useful because it might at least help them to get more knowledge. (L10)

### ***TOEFL and its advantages for students' future***

The main reasons underlying the students' need for TOEFL are for their future careers and studies. It provides candidates with an economical advantage in that a good TOEFL score could lead to better job prospects. According to L2 TOEFL is:

... like a screening device, a test that people conduct to know the average English knowledge and skill that the people have.

Well, as a graduate you know, TOEFL score, it makes it easier for them to get the job, because not only international companies which are in Indonesia but also some government institutions need TOEFL score. I mean TOEFL score will be one of the requirements to apply for the job. (L14)

Most of the participants agreed that with a good TOEFL score, students will be able to continue their studies abroad, especially in English speaking countries:

I think it's very helpful in many ways because after they graduate from the university, if they get good score in TOEFL, they can apply for further education for example for applying scholarship to English speaking countries. (L3)

If they have the high TOEFL score, they will have more opportunity to study further, I mean to study in a higher level. They can choose any universities that they want if they have fulfilled the standard of TOEFL. (L8)

Five participants provided another view on the advantage of TOEFL, one that is related to a symbol of prestige:

As far as I know until today, TOEFL is the only, the only instrument that is a standard test that can measure student English proficiency. So it can also be some kind of prestige, if they get high TOEFL score meaning that it will indicate that their English is good. (L4)

### **Discussion**

According to the participants, TOEFL is difficult, especially for beginner learners of English. This response is not surprising because TOEFL is mainly and originally set for those who aspire to continue their study in the United States or Canada (as also reported by Simner, 1998). Hence, its contents reflect American norms and nuances of the inner circle variety of English. Therefore, the candidates who apparently pass TOEFL successfully are those who are familiar with this variety. This positions the ones who are not accustomed to this variety at a disadvantage of not being able to graduate, further their studies and may even decrease their employment prospects. Following the views of Davies, et al (2003, p. 574), it is important to emphasize the ability to communicate effectively within the region where the tests are taken rather than assessing the proficiency levels based on the inner circle norms.

The participants admitted that unfamiliar or advanced level vocabularies used in the texts are the main problems in reading and listening. In the listening section, the limited time available and the fast speaking rate of the speakers are mentioned as the cause of difficulties. As a result, the candidates require more time to process the materials tested on them. The intonation and accent used are not ones which they are familiar with and this further complicates the reliability of the scores. A good assessment tool would measure a candidate's competency according to what they know, based on the contents that have been taught. However, in the case of Indonesian universities, the lecturers who teach TOEFL are Indonesians who may not have acquired native-like accents. Hence, the exposure to authentic inner circle speech variety is limited and would not assist the candidates in achieving good TOEFL scores. Based on this observation, it would seem biased to test a person's proficiency based on factors that they are not accustomed to.

Furthermore, reading was said to be one of the most difficult sections because there are instances when the text is related to the history of America. This fact shows that the variety of English tested is really one that is permeated by American norms. Because the content of the reading texts are often culturally alien to the students' background knowledge, it creates difficulty for them to give perfect answers in the reading section. In this case, TOEFL may not be a suitable tool to be applied in Indonesia as a standard measurement of English proficiency where the candidates do not identify their knowledge with the content of the texts. Another barrier to the reliability of TOEFL is that Indonesians commonly use another variety of English. As indicated by Hill (cited in Davies, et al., 2003) the majority of Indonesian students use English to communicate

internationally with other non-native speakers in Asia. As such, the test should emphasize the ability to communicate effectively, instead of following native varieties such as General American. This criticism is echoed by linguists that this test is specific to an inner circle variety of English, especially American (Davies et al., 2003; Jenkins, 2006; Johnson, Jordan, & Poehner, 2005).

Despite the perception that TOEFL is a difficult test, the participants acknowledged and affirmed its strengths as a well-known, reliable and trustworthy test. This perception is not only apparent in Indonesia, but also internationally where it is applied more in outer and expanding countries. It seems to support what Brown (2004) maintains as the reason for these tests to be used in relation to placement purposes in developing countries in that they are readily available and ensure high face validity. It is deemed as a reliable test of English proficiency, regardless of the fact that it measures only the ability of performing American English norms.

In Indonesia, TOEFL is actually still considered quite expensive because of the currency conversion from dollar to rupiah. The profits from TOEFL do not only come from the test cost, but also from the preparation made to yield best results in TOEFL. Zacharias (2005) found that most respondents in her research preferred the internationally published materials particularly of those published in inner circle countries such as Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, and Pearson Education, rather than materials written and published by Indonesian ELT professionals. Her study indicates that Indonesian preference for either English materials or tests is still for those that are based on inner circle varieties. It is perhaps more significant than before to promote and acknowledge the creativity of constructing English tests by non-native experts within the country for domestic interest, at least for the purpose of reducing the assessment costs for the candidates. However, since the perception of inner-circle countries is always that of “experts” and Kachru’s (year) expanding countries are always regarded as “learners”, the teachers from these latter countries apparently have limited opportunities “to build their own experiences by creating effective, powerful, and principled language-teaching approaches and methods” (Rubdy, 2009, p. 160).

All of the participants strongly believed that TOEFL should be the standard test in assessing one’s English proficiency. TOEFL is well regarded by some participants especially to measure the written skill of the test candidates. The lecturers strongly supported the use of TOEFL in academic settings, either in English speaking countries or in Indonesia. Some participants pointed out that by preparing for the TOEFL test, it will help them in reading textbooks, actively participate in lectures, writing in English and other academic-related activities. It is obvious that this perception reflects the over-reliance on the standard inner circle varieties as a tool to increase knowledge.

Language planners in developing countries need to be aware that the original academic setting suggested by TOEFL producer is actually that of America and Canada.

As to its original purpose, TOEFL was designed to measure the language ability of students who are going to be involved in scholastic activities in the university environment such as class discussions, textbooks, lectures and other relevant university activities in the United States and Canada (Stupak, as cited in Lowenberg1993). However, in practice, TOEFL is mostly used in the countries where English has no internal function and that it acts as a screening test either for university admission or a hurdle, which students must overcome to graduate from university. TOEFL is even required for job applications. In Indonesia, some companies require TOEFL such as in some flight agencies, attorney councils, and other companies or institutions (Dewi, 2009). Generally, these companies need TOEFL because they are international companies or institutions which use English for interaction with other nations or involve working with media or textbooks in English. Still, in those cases TOEFL appears to be irrelevant because the English used is for the purpose of communicating among different cultures, and the core points in such cases is intelligibility (Sharifian, 2009).

Perhaps a more practical and valid alternative would be to create assessment instruments and pedagogical materials that would match students' cultural knowledge and English proficiency according to the variety that they are familiar with. Indeed what is needed in Indonesia within the EIL context is not a "one size fits all" assessment instrument, rather an assessment that fulfills the dual purposes of both communicative and academic purposes. The production of this assessment should not be determined by external organizations but must be an entirely local effort by Indonesian educators particularly in terms of content and items that should be tested. Furthermore, this would assist Indonesian universities to unchain the Western hegemony that binds academic decisions. This would reduce the notion of prestige often attached to the inner circle variety and elevates the recognition of competencies in English language teaching among speakers of other varieties of English.

## **Conclusion**

It can be concluded that the majority of the participants have positive attitudes towards TOEFL. The popularity of TOEFL as the major international test in professional circle (Leung & Lewkowicz, 2006) is still locked in the participants' mind. Therefore, it is not surprising that the majority of them support the policy of requiring TOEFL as a requirement to graduate from the universities. Perhaps the absence as well as negligence of their own prescribed variety of English further strengthens this attitude because the participants are not exposed to an alternative to the inner circle variety. Furthermore, the academic and economic significance attached to the achievement of TOEFL influences an individual's prestige position in the society. This further enhances the importance of employing TOEFL as a measurement for English proficiency.

Since English is used as a foreign language which does not perform internal function within the country, the process of nativization has not fully evolved. But

should this occur and that the existence of Indonesian English is identified, it would then be more impartial to test students on the ability to communicate the Indonesian variety of English. This variety will then be recognized and can be a model provided by teachers and would serve as a more valid and reliable target for the learners.

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