Exploring the Link Between Topic Initiation and Chinese Learner Involvement in NS-NNS Casual Conversations

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Abstract

This paper reports on a case study which explored Chinese L2 learners’ conversational involvement in NS-NNS interaction in a study-abroad context. In particular, the study investigated the possible link between topic initiation and conversational involvement examined under the commonly identified topic genres in casual conversations, including “observation”, “opinion seeking/providing”, “story-telling”, “chat” topics and “gossip”. The findings show differences in the choices of topic initiation between the NS English group and the NNS Chinese group. Further analysis found that the participants’ topic initiations did not necessarily lead to their active conversational involvement and suggests that the mere fact of getting involved in a topic does not always produce a sense of shared common ground between/among the conversationalists. The positive link between topic initiation and conversational involvement (such as in “observation”), and its impact upon L2 learners are also discussed in this study, confirming the social constructionist view that social roles and interpersonal relations are created and recreated at a micro-level in everyday discourse.

Key words: NS-NNS conversation; topic initiation; learner involvement; topic genre

1. Introduction

Conversational involvement, according to Gumperz (1982), is the basis of all linguistic understanding. For Gumperz, involvement describes an observable, active participation in conversation. It is comparable to what Goodwin (1981) calls “conversational engagement” and Merritt (1982) calls “mutual engagement”: an observable state of being in coordinated interaction, as distinguished from mere co-presence. Listening, in this view,
can be an active enterprise just like speaking, requiring interpretation comparable to that demanded in speaking. However, the amount of conversational involvement in terms of the participants’ verbal contribution matters where second language (L2) learners are involved. Under the interactionist approach within the field of second language acquisition (SLA), active participation in conversations means that learners have the opportunity to receive and produce comprehensible language and to collaborate in the building and maintenance of the conversation through constant meaning negotiation (e.g., Swain, 1995; Pica et al., 1996).

The role of social interaction in SLA, particularly the importance of L2 learners’ opportunity to interact with native speakers, has been well documented since Ferguson’s (1975) pioneering studies of the phenomenon in the 1970s. There has also been a significant body of research describing the linguistic features produced by both L2 learners (NNS) and their native speaking interlocutors (NS). However, insufficient attention is given to the interactional conditions under which L2 learners are actively involved in NS-NNS conversations to promote meaningful negotiation. Much less research has been carried out to investigate L2 learners’ conversational involvement in casual conversations with native speakers of English. Consequently, the social context is impoverished and undervalued in NS-NNS interaction, and L2 learning is framed as a process of message transmission and reception (e.g., Rampton, 1997; Firth & Wagner, 1997). In line with this position, conversational participants are regarded as sharing equal options or rights regarding their conversational behavior, such as when to initiate topics, or, how to contribute to topic construction.

Thus, there is a tendency to take it for granted that once a casual conversation starts, conversational involvement exists, and that interlocutors are cooperating and working together to “negotiate meaning”. Such an assumption is questioned even among socially and linguistically homogeneous groups, let alone among interlocutors who are from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As Gumperz and Tannen jointly argue (Tannen & Gumperz, 1979), the levels on which differences occur, and the depth of misunderstandings are far more extreme in the case of broad cross-cultural communication. While most of the existing studies on NS-NNS conversations have examined how confirmation checks, comprehension checks, clarification requests, repetitions and questions affect the pattern of interaction, there is a lack of reporting on how variability in topic choice affects the degree of learner involvement in NS-NNS casual conversations. This study therefore aims to contribute to this dimension of research by exploring the possible link between topic initiation and learner involvement under the various types of topics emerging from NS-NNS conversations.

2. Literature review

2.1 Casual conversations
Currently, there is no lack of research on social interaction drawing data exclusively from “everyday casual conversational settings”. However, the concept of “casual conversation”
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is rarely clearly defined. The common view regarding “casual conversation as the base or simply the external frame within which internal variation applies” has often led to the impression that the smaller conversational units or procedures can be validly studied without saying anything about the larger unit, the conversation itself (Wilson, 1989: 2). Intuitively, at least, a casual conversation seems to be equivalent to any social interaction in everyday settings, during which various modes of conversational units, features and genres appear. This view of casual conversation, according to Eggins and Slade (1997) is only partial, and it does not give credit to the unique structures a casual conversation has and the specific functional purposes it serves.

Lakoff (1982) has compared ordinary conversation with functional talk such as persuasion and lectures, and points out:

[ordinary conversation] is reciprocal: any participant has the same conversational options as any other, and if one can ask a question and expect an answer, so can the other; if one can ask a particular type of question, or make a certain sort of statement, the other has the same privilege in turn, and if one can refuse to answer, so can the other… (Lakoff, 1982: 27)

Lakoff’s “ordinary conversation” is very similar to what is meant by “casual conversation” in this study, that is, talks held in naturally occurring situations, and “are not motivated by a clear pragmatic purpose, and which display informality and humor…” (Eggins & Slade, 1997: 20). Lakoff’s assumption that casual conversationalists have equal options and rights regarding their conversational behavior is essential to highlight the nature of casual conversation as a particular speech event, as different from other speech events, such as interaction taking place in classrooms and in courtrooms (for a similar view see Wilson, 1989: 8). However, such a position in defining a casual conversation is not without challenge, as every social activity is inevitably under the influence of social rules, whether they are transparent or hidden.

Eggins and Slade (1997) have discussed the paradox of casual conversation in their study. They suggest that the apparent triviality of casual conversation disguises the significant interpersonal work it achieves as participants enact and confirm social identities and relations. The paradox lies in the fact that “casual conversation is the type of talk in which we feel most relaxed, most spontaneous and most ourselves, and yet casual conversation is a critical site for the social construction of reality” (Eggins & Slade, 1997: 16). However, evidence of analysis suggests that conversation is anything but trivial: it constructs social reality, and it requires different levels of knowledge, linking the micro-patterns of the conversation to its wider socio-cultural contexts.

Conversational participants, in this sense, are regarded as “social actors”, who have to attend to their interpersonal relationships through the conversational behavior they perform, regardless of whether they are involved in L1 or L2 discourse. Underlying this proposition is the social constructionist view that self roles are created and re-created on the level of discourse through choice of language, topic management and the presentation of self (Kramsch, 2003: 129; also see Ochs, 1993; Scollon, 1996). Consequently, this
challenges the view that casual conversation displays the “least or no power difference” (Kress, 1985). This is no different with NS-NNS casual conversations, only that the way the participants co-construct their interpersonal relations may show differences compared to those involved in monolingual talks held among native speakers of English. For either model of interaction, the participants’ ability to get involved in a conversation has a significant role in constructing who they are, and how they relate to the world in which they are living.

2.2 Involvement in casual conversations

The psychological effect of learner involvement on L2 learners can be traced where coherence and involvement are considered as the goal of the interaction, and possibly, the result, such as in casual conversations—when discourse succeeds in creating meaning through familiar strategies. Kasper and Rose observe (2001):

> Communicative action includes not only using speech acts (such as apologizing, complaining, complimenting, and requesting), but also engaging in different types of discourse and participating in speech acts of varying length and complexity. (Kasper & Rose, 2001: 2)

Norton (2000), for example, has examined the relationships between L2 learners and the social world in which they are living. According to Norton, L2 learners’ ability to participate actively in a conversation strengthens their sense of belonging to the same community group; and their inability to get involved in a conversation, on the other hand, challenges their social identities (2000). In another study conducted by Norton and associates (1993), they argue:

> If learners control the rate of flow of information in a communicative event, the locus of control will be in their favor and they will be relatively more confident about their language skills than in communicative events in which the locus of control is not in their favor. (Norton, Swain & Hart, 1993: 27)

It would be interesting to investigate what Norton et al. mean by “the locus of control”, if more space was possible in this study. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to say that the ability to elaborate on the mutually established topic signals the speaker’s attempt to “control the rate of flow of information”, suggesting the role of conversational dominance in constructing the sense of “being in control” in social interaction.

If, according to Pellegrino (2005: 8), L2 learners constantly reassess their L2 competence based on the particular words they use, the lilt of their intonation, and even the precision of their pronunciation, then the question is: how does their topic initiation affect the degree of their involvement and, thus, the way they perceive themselves as co-participants in NS-NNS conversations? This is based on the research assumption that the beginning of a topic not only affects the content of the topical talk, but also its sequence structure, depending on the sequential environment in which the topic is initiated.
2.3 Defining “conversational topics” and “topic initiation”

The reason for choosing “conversational topics” as the appropriate conversational unit to examine conversational involvement is twofold. First of all, a conversational topic provides the boundary to study a segment, in which learner involvement in NS-NNS conversations can be quantified in terms of words uttered. Second, the structure or the procedures involved in topic construction makes it possible to examine how conversational involvement is achieved or not. For example, although a person at a time is given the responsibility for developing a topic, topical talk is nevertheless a collaborative activity in the sense that the other person may produce questions, invitations, continuation, extensions, and so forth, to keep the line of talk going.

In other words, topicality is an achievement of conversationalists, something organized and made observable in patterned ways that can be described. Topicality, then, is a matter not only of content, but is partly constituted in the procedures conversationalists utilize to display understanding and to achieve a proper turn in order to respond to a prior speaker. It is in this sense that Nelson and Gruendel characterize dialogue as “an extended series of turns during which a single topic or set of related topics is sustained or changed according to conversational rules” (1979: 75). One way to identify the boundary between two sequential topics is to locate the place of topic initiation, that is, where a new focus or a mentionable focus is negotiated in the talk.

Topic initiation, in this study, is defined similarly to Button and Casey’s (1985) “topic nomination”, indicating beginning a topic designed to interactionally and mutually establish a topic among the conversational participants. Based on existing studies (Button & Casey, 1984, 1985; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973), new foci in points of discussion can either flow out of the prior topics or be considered as disjuncture from prior topics. Both ways of topic initiation are designed to mutually produce conversational topics. However, due to the differences regarding the devices and the methods used to begin a new topic, as well as the varying sequential environments where topics are initiated, the way topics are developed can differ a lot. Topic-initiating markers, topic-shift signals and the content under discussion were all taken into consideration in coding topic initiations in this study, and the detail will be provided in the Methodology section.

2.4 Topic genres in casual conversation

This section introduces the concept of “topic genre” to explore the sequence structure of each conversational topic. It also discusses the way a topic genre constructs social identity.

From a critical discourse analysis perspective, “genre” is “a socially rectified way of using language in connection with a particular type of social activity” (Fairclough, 1995: 14). This particular type of social activity, according to Bakhtin (1986), is organized by following certain conversational structures to achieve particular social goals. For Bakhtin,

Even in the most free, the most unconstrained conversation, we cast our speech in definite generic forms, sometimes rigid and trite ones, sometimes more flexible, plastic and creative ones… (Bakhtin, 1986: 78)
This is agreed by Eggins and Slade, who argue that, “although casual conversation sometimes, and probably most of the time, appears aimless and trivial, it is in fact a highly structured, functionally motivated, semantic activity” (Eggins & Slade, 1997: 6).

The concept of “topic genre”, therefore, is developed based on the observation that a conversational topic, as a particular conversational unit, has its own distinctive discourse structure. We recognize a conversational topic not only because it is about “something”, not “something else”, but also, based on the discourse patterns it presents. Very often, such patterns can be discerned at the very beginning of a topic, immediately after the topic initiation is made. For example, the utterance that “yesterday I went to the post office” indicates the start of a new topic, which also suggests that story-telling may follow. However, whether this topic initiation will indeed proceed into story-telling or otherwise into a “gossip” text has to be negotiated with other participants. It may turn out to be just a “chat” segment.

Using monolingual talks held among native speakers of English as data, Eggins and Slade have identified five common types of topic genre in casual conversations, including: “story-telling”, “observation”, “opinion”, “gossip” and “chat” topics (Eggins & Slade, 1997). One of the distinctive characteristics that make a topic appear to belong to a particular genre is the possibility to predict its constituent stages. Thus one way to classify a chunk topic is to identify the constituent stages and to explain how they relate to each other in constituting the whole topic. This involves the functional labeling of the genre stages within a topic, and then asking how each stage contributes towards achieving the overall social purpose of the genre. Where the boundaries between constituent stages are not obvious, the semantic and lexico-grammatical features of a topic are examined for “evidence”. The definition for each topic genre is provided here, followed by a discussion of its role in forming and reshaping social relationships among the conversational participants at a micro-level.

(1) “Story-telling” topic

Story-telling is very common in casual conversation. Eggins and Slade (1997) argue that the “overall structure” of a fully formed narrative of personal experience involves six stages as presented in the following formula (1997: 235): (Abstract) ^ Orientation ^ Complication ^ Evaluation ^ Resolution ^ (Coda). The symbol ^ is placed between the constituent stages to indicate how they are ordered with respect to one another. The stages within the brackets ( ) are optional, occurring only in instances of the genre. Naturally, the intention to tell stories has to be made at the beginning, possibly involving the orientation stage “to orient the listener in respect to place, time and behavioral situation” (Labov & Waletzky, 1967: 39). Once such topic initiation is successful, whether the speaker can hold the conversational floor to continue the next few stages of story-telling is nevertheless the result of mutual collaboration with other conversational participants.

Story-telling provides conversationalists with a resource for assessing and confirming affiliations with others. Besides its normal function of entertaining and amusing the audience, story-telling also offers the participants the opportunity to share experiences and to display personal perceptions that are the result of certain social contexts. Thus, by
telling what happened and how we feel about it, values, attitudes and ways of seeing the world are constantly represented and created.

(2) “Observation” topic
“Observation” topics are a type identified by Martin and Rothery (1986). They deal with events or things where factuality is what matters. In our daily lives, we constantly make observations with or without our knowledge. It is fair to say that our understanding of the world we live in is based on observation. We see things and hear things everyday through various media; and as social beings, we also feel the need to share these observations with other people.

“Local observations”, as the term suggests, are those made of events, objects or people that are within the immediate physical setting and within the immediate action of conversation as they occur. The other type of observation, “Non-local observation”, can be anything that comes to the speaker’s mind. It can be a description about an event, a place, a person or simply narration about what is happening in our daily lives, such as bringing up a newsworthy topic. Shared observation relates people to each other, as the evaluative comments reveal people’s values and attitudes, and thus, shape and reform the interpersonal relations among them. This also means that one’s ability to initiate an observation or to contribute to an “observation” topic relies on the common ground shared between/among the conversationalists. An observation is made on a fact and normally would be followed by a comment. Hence, the obligatory elements of structure are: Observation ^ Comment.

(3) “Opinion” topic
An opinion is defined by Schiffrin as “an individual’s internal, evaluative position about a circumstance” (Schiffrin, 1990: 244), and as such, “opinion” topics are those that propose, elaborate, defend and exchange opinions about people, things or events (Eggins & Slade, 1997: 266). They are expressions of attitude, and not of fact. Once the opinion is given, the interactant is required to react. Where disagreement occurs, the speaker will almost certainly provide evidence to defend his or her opinion, resulting in an exchange of opinions which then leads to a resolution of some sort before the text is closed. Social conflict, such as in the form of disagreement and challenge, is perceived by Schiffrin as demonstrating the solidarity of a relationship—simply because they display the ability of those in that relationship to confront each other, a behavior normally avoided between strangers or acquaintances (Schiffrin, 1990: 256). On the contrary, in casual talks involving less intimate participants, there is an orientation towards consensus. The genre structure of opinion texts, as identified by Horvath and Eggins (1995) is: Opinion ^ Reaction ^ (Evidence) ^ (Resolution).

(4) “Gossip” topic
Gossip has been used in many different ways in literature. In the most general sense it can refer to any “idle” chat about daily life; or it can be used more specifically to refer to conversations between two or more people about another person behind his or her back.
Based on Eggins and Slade’s definition, the “gossip” used in this study refers to talk which “involves pejorative judgment of an absent other” (1997: 278). More specifically, the focus is on talk which is meant to be confidential (or at least not reported back to the third party), and is about an absent person who is known to at least one of the participants. Opinion seeking or providing an opinion involves sharing opinions and judgments. Gossiping, on the other hand, places judgments specifically about a person’s behavior or physical attributes, and by doing so implicitly asserting appropriate social values and norms. In this way, both “opinion” and “gossip” reinforce and maintain the values of the social group.

(5) “Chat” topic
Strictly speaking, a “chat” segment indicates verbal exchanges that cannot be classified into any genre, although it constitutes an individual topic on its own. These “chat” segments are where structures are managed locally with highly interactive, short turn-taking among conversationalists. The concept of “chat” is thus mainly constructed to be distinguished from the “chunk topic” that has a global or macro-structure, whereas the structure beyond the exchange is more predictable, and as a result, a certain genre can be applied. Therefore, it is important to note that “chat” used in this study is not a topic genre in its strict sense, simply because it does not contain any predictable sequence or pattern that is required for a genre. However, its social function as a particular type of topic is not to be ignored: People chat not just to “kill time”, but rather to clarify and extend the interpersonal ties that have brought them together. The complexity and perhaps, the unpredictability of any casual talk have decided that both “chat” segment and chunk text be taken into consideration if a more thorough description of casual conversation is to be achieved.

Essentially, the five genres (including “chat” topics) reviewed above are all about affirming and reconfirming affiliation and doing so, they reflect the primary goal of casual talk, which is to establish and maintain social relationships. Thus, the strength of a genre approach is that it stresses the relationship between language and its social context, between the linguistic realization of a text and its social and cultural function.

2.5 The genre orientation of topic initiation and its effects on conversational involvement
The advantage of examining conversational involvement under topic genre is the fairly stable sequence structure within each topic genre, the analysis of which can disclose the devices or strategies conversational participants employ to mutually develop a topic, or sometimes, to shift the focus of talk. Topic initiation, indicating the beginning stage of a topic genre, therefore, not only decides the content of the talk, but also affects participants’ roles regarding their conversational involvement. Take “story-telling” genre, as an example, where the speaker is most likely to be the story-teller, his or her dominant position is almost pre-determined at the initial stage, although how the story unfolds subsequently may rely on the responses from other participants.
While disagreement exists in terms of how a speaker manages to successfully introduce a new topic into the conversation, it is generally agreed that topic initiation has a genre orientation (Bakhtin, 1986; Jefferson & Lee, 1992). In fact, without such orientation guiding what is to be said next, any kind of social conversation is almost impossible, as observed by Bakhtin:

We learn to cast our speech in generic forms and when hearing others’ speech, we guess its genre from the very first words; we predict a certain length and a certain compositional structure; we foresee the end; that is from the very beginning we have a sense of the whole speech. If speech genres did not exist and we had not mastered them; if we had to originate them during the speech process and construct each utterance at will for the first time, speech communication would be almost impossible. (Bakhtin, 1986: 78)

This genre orientation of topic initiation also means that assumptions can be made about the topic initiator’s intentions. It is possible that a topic is introduced to achieve a certain social function that has little to do with the speaker’s interest in the topic. For example, a new topic may be brought in to distract people’s attention from the current focus, either because it is too sensitive or causing embarrassment. On most occasions, however, people initiate a topic to say something or make a point that is relevant under that particular context. Following this logic, it can be assumed that the speaker who initiates the topic will most likely be the person to achieve active engagement in the talk, unless the topic initiation aims to invite participation from the others.

Either way, the prominent position within a conversational topic means that special expertise or proprietary rights are required of the speakers, the degree of which will depend on the length of the talk, the symbolic significance of the content, as well as the quality of the attention received during the speaking (Erickson, 1990). In NS-NNS conversations, L2 learners’ language ability is certainly under challenge. But the real difficulty may lie in the lack of cultural resources shared between L2 learners and native speakers of English. According to Wardhaugh (1985), learning a new language from a textbook or in situations far removed from contexts in which the language is used offered learners no assurances that they will actually be able to converse with speakers of that language. Romero-Trillo (2002) also points out that an important part of L2 learning is the acquisition of new forms of discourse. In other words, L2 learners need to recognize to what extent their discourse is actually used and understood in the target sociocultural context to create common ground for effective communication.

As the degree of the need for a shared common ground varies depending on the topic genres, speakers may have cognitive and affective relationships to particular topics instead of others, resulting in different conversational roles among the conversationalists. How the speakers introduce new topics and how active their roles are as compared with their interlocutors, will therefore significantly influence their perception of the social identity each holds.

Where the Chinese L2 learners in this study achieved conversational involvement, it is important to ask “why” and “how”, to compare it with the areas where they were
perceived as less active conversationalists. A study was thus designed in order to explore the following research questions:

1. Under what types of topic genre did the participants’ topic initiation lead to their active involvement?
2. Under what types of topic genre did the participants’ topic initiation fail to lead to their active involvement?
3. What are the implications for understanding the link between topic initiation and learner involvement in NS-NNS interaction?

3. Research methodology

3.1 The participants
The data of this paper came from the case study of three competent Chinese L2 learners doing a postgraduate course in English Language Teaching in the UK. The three subjects, named Lin, Cheng, and Wong respectively (pseudonyms only), were defined as competent L2 learners based on their IELTS results (all with a score above 6.0) and their educational backgrounds. They were all females, between the ages of 24 to 29 at the time. They had all undertaken English teaching in China, with two of them teaching at a secondary level, and the other teaching at the primary level. All of them had some opportunities for using English in China, either for academic purposes or for social purposes. When the data was collected, the duration of their stay in the UK was between three months and one year. All of them were keen to improve their English and were happy to meet up with native speakers to have some social conversations.

3.2 Data collection
Six conversations (abbreviated as C1, C2, etc. hence after) between the Chinese subjects (NNS) and native speakers of English (NS) were arranged and audio recorded during an eight-month period of time. C3 was recorded three months after C1 and C2 took place. C4 was recorded another three months later, and C5 and C6 were arranged in the final month of the study. The choice of the four participating native speakers was decided by their availability. The first three were given the pseudonyms as Tony, Jane, and Helen in this study and were all retired teachers in their 60s. The fourth was given the name of Steve, a PhD student from the same university which the Chinese subjects attended. The six NS-NNS conversations were arranged at the convenience of the participants, with regard to the time and the venue. Five of the conversations were recorded at one of the NS participants’ house, and the Chinese students were invited either for afternoon tea or for a meal. Only one conversation was held in a seminar room at the university, between the three subjects and Steve, the native speaker.

3.3 Data analysis procedures
The method of transcription adopted for this study follows the principles set forth by sociologists of language (see, for example, Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). The system
should be simple to use, easy to learn, avoiding phonetic and grammatical detail. As a consequence of the audio-recording, the participants’ nonverbal behaviors were not available for analysis. The different stages of coding and data analysis are briefly explained in this section.

3.3.1 Locating topic initiations
The first step involved in data analysis is the location of topic initiations within each individual NS-NNS conversation. Topic-initiating markers used in this study include topic shift signals and either individualized or general topic-marking devices such as:

(1) Topic eliciting questions:
- So, so tell me how is England?
- So how about Southampton? Have you been outside of Southampton?

(2) Some statements can function as a topic-marking device. For example, the talk on “English as an international language” was started by Cheng’s comment that “Just because English is an international language, it is so popular in the world.” The statement indicates the beginning of a new topic as it bears little relevance to the previous utterance.

(3) Other topic-initiating signals include structural evidence for topic introduction or change, such as:
- Let’s go back to... (a topic)
- Did I tell you... (a topic)

Where no obvious pauses or topic-shift signals could be located, the coding was based on the content under discussion. Examples are the talks on “pronunciation” and “Chinese language” in C1, where a clear and consistent focus can be identified in each individual fragment. They are clearly separable from other fragments on the basis of logic and content. Topic initiation, was therefore, traced back to the beginning part of the fragment.

3.3.2 Coding conversational topics
The identification of topic initiations across the six NS-NNS conversations led to the coding of individual topics in each talk. The six NS-NNS conversations were defined as casual talks because no specific goals were set for the participants. The casualness of the talks was further confirmed by the variety of topics shown from the initial analysis, such as “fireplace”, “weather”, “going to places”, “buying organic food” and so on. Each conversation was coded into a number of conversational topics in sequential numbers.

As discussed earlier, it is possible that a topic initiation fails to be taken up by the participants in social talk, either due to local distraction, or the unpleasant nature of the result of the talk that such a topic initiation may create. However, such divergence was rare in the actual conversational data, reflecting the social roles of the participants as polite hosts and guests, each struggling to maintain the co-operative principles described by Grice (1975). That is, each conversational participant should make his or her conversational contribution “such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purposes or direction of the talk exchange in which he or she is engaged” (Grice, 1975: 45).
3.3.3 Quantifying conversational involvement
In defining the prominence of the major speaker in story-telling, Erickson (1990) regards the length of the story being told as one of the important elements. As such, he chose to use air time to actually analyze the phenomenon of conversational dominance. It was indicated by the total number of turns of speaking in each story, and was proved to differentiate well among the three most frequent narrators in Erickson’s study. For a more accurate measure than air time in this study, the amount of total words contributed by the speaker was adopted to code conversational involvement, and this allowed the categorization of the participants’ conversational involvement into three types: NNS dominance, NNS active involvement, and NS dominance. It is reasonable to assume that the native speakers on an average had more to say than the three subjects during the six NS-NNS conversations, considering their higher ethnolinguistic status. For this particular reason, the mere fact of a native speaker taking a dominant position in a talk did not necessarily exclude the possibility of the NNS subjects being perceived as active conversationalists. The following principles were applied in coding the participants’ conversational involvement:

• NS dominance: NS dominance positions were granted when all the participating NNS subjects’ conversational involvement was rated below 10% regarding the number of words they each contributed;
• NNS dominance: Similarly, considering the ethnolinguistic status of the three NNS subjects, as compared to their native interlocutors, topics with a verbal contribution of over 50% of the total words uttered from any one of the participating NNS subjects were regarded as significant, and were therefore, marked as NNS dominant;
• NNS active involvement: When one of the participating NNS subjects was making a verbal contribution between 10% and 50% regarding the amount of words he or she uttered, the topic was coded into the category of “NNS active topic”.

3.3.4 Categorizing the conversational topics into different types of topic genre
Although the task of categorizing the conversational topics into different types of topic genre was not without challenge, the initial results revealed something unexpected: two new types of topic genre emerged from the actual conversational data, which did not fit into the above five types of topic genre both in terms of the content of the talk and in regarding the sequential patterns of the moves. These are the talks where general and personal information were exchanged; hence the terms “information seeking/providing” and “personal information seeking/providing” were applied.

At a grammatical level, “information seeking/providing” topics tend to start with Wh-questions. Sometimes, they begin with statements that provide knowledge gaps to be filled. At a semantic level, “information seeking/providing” topics contain information exchanges. One feature that typified most of these NS-NNS conversations was the linguistic assistance provided by the native speakers when the NNS subjects appeared to be struggling with their L2 use. “Personal information seeking/providing” texts use more personal pronouns than “information seeking/providing” texts, when they involve addressing direct questions about a particular person.
Where more than one topic genre appeared within one topic, the text was carefully examined. In most cases, the topic was re-coded, into two topics where possible.

3.3.5 Qualitative analysis of the topic initiations
At this level, topic initiations were coded under the different topic genres. The genre orientation of each topic initiation is based on the genre structure of the topic, where such topic initiation was successful. However, not all topic initiations made their way into a full conversational topic as some failed to be mutually developed between/among the conversational participants to a substantial length for genre analysis (with a total word number under 30). In cases like this, the interpretation of the speakers’ intentions relied on the sequential environments where such topic initiations were made, such as significant pauses, turn-takings and back-channeling. For example, following significant pauses and with a topic-shift signal starting the next new topic (that is, with little relevance to the previous topic), the NS speakers were found to take the responsibility to fill the conversational gaps by inviting conversational involvement from the NNS subjects. It is left to the next section to explore the methods and devices NS speakers use to achieve different purposes, as well as the impact they produce on the social relationships between the two groups.

4. Findings
Based on the quantification of the conversational data and the qualitative interpretation of the participants’ topic initiations at the data analysis stage, this section sets out to present the findings of the study in order to answer the relevant research questions.

4.1 Topic initiations

![Figure 1. A comparison of topic initiations under the various topic genres between the NNS group and the NS group](image)

The Arabic numeral stands for the quantity of conversational topics initiated by the participants as two ethnolinguistic groups under each topic genre; the percentage represents the proportion individual topic genres take within each ethnolinguistic group; “information”, “personal information” and “opinion” are the abbreviations for “information seeking/providing”, “personal information seeking/providing” and “opinion seeking/providing”, respectively.
Figures 1 shows the distribution of topic initiations under the various topic genres between the NNS group and the NS group. Comparing the figures below shows both the NNS group and the NS group introducing a large number of “observation” topics. With a percentage of 37% and 35% contributed by the two groups respectively among all the genres, both groups showed a tendency to make observations. The same percentage of topic initiations was shown under “information seeking/providing” topics, although the NS group started more of such topics in total numbers. Overall, the native speakers across the conversations initiated more topics than the NNS subjects. The NS group outnumbered the NNS group in “observation”, “information seeking/providing”, “personal information seeking/providing”, and “story-telling”. The only topic genres under which the NNS group seemed to show more interest than the NS group were “opinion seeking/providing”, and in “chat” topics, though with a total number much less impressive than the others. Initial analysis of the findings indicated that the participants’ topic initiations did not necessarily lead to their active involvement. What remains unknown is the way topic initiation affected the nature of the talk, which then resulted in different types of conversational involvement within each topic. Thus, NNS dominance and NS dominance were examined under the different types of topic genre that emerged from the conversational data.

4.2 Topic initiation and conversational involvement under topic genres
Figure 2 compares the two groups’ conversational dominance under the different types of topic genre as two ethnolinguistic groups. The following conclusions were drawn:

- While the NNS group dominated more “personal information seeking/providing” topics, the NS group showed a tendency to dominate “information seeking/providing” topics. This presented an interesting contrast to the tendencies among the two groups regarding their topic initiations. Previously, the NS group was found to have started more “personal information seeking/providing” topics than the NNS group, while the NNS group initiated a similar number of “information seeking/providing” topics as the NS group.

![Figure 2. Topic dominance and topic genres between the NNS group and the NS group](image)

The number in the table represents the quantity of conversational topics each group dominated under each topic genre; “information”, “personal information” and “opinion” are the abbreviations for “information seeking/providing”, “personal information seeking/providing” and “opinion seeking/providing”, respectively.
The NNS group in total took the dominant position in 6 “opinion seeking/providing” topics. Under the same topic genre, however, NS dominance only appeared in 3 topics. Such a result was in line with the participants’ topic initiations, as more “opinion seeking/providing” topics were initiated by the NNS group than the NS group.

“Story-telling” was one of the genres where the two groups showed a distinctive difference. The nature and structure of “story-telling” naturally lead to the dominant role of the story-teller. The result that the NNS group had only dominated one “story-telling” topic reflected the fact that the NS group, on the whole, told more stories than the NNS subjects in this study.

A large number of “NNS dominant” topics fell into the category of “observation”. It was also one of the topic genres that showed a constantly positive link between topic initiation and active conversational involvement.

Compared with “observation”, “opinion seeking/providing” and “story-telling”, the positive link between topic initiation and conversational involvement was missing with topic genres such as “information seeking/providing” and “personal information seeking/providing”, though the underlying causes varied, as explored through Table 1 and 2.

Table 1. Distribution of “information seeking/providing” topics between the NNS group and the NS group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic initiation</th>
<th>NNS group (total number of topics: 20)</th>
<th>NS group (total number of topics: 24)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information seeking</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information providing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic dominance</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Distribution of “personal information seeking/providing” topics between the NNS group and the NS group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic initiation</th>
<th>NNS group (total number of topics:12)</th>
<th>NS group (total number of topics: 26)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal information seeking</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal information providing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic dominance</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analyzing the nature of “information seeking/providing” topics provided an obvious contrast between the NNS and the NS groups (see Table 1). While in 22 out of the 24 topics (91.7%) the NS group took the initiative to provide information, only in 3 out of the 20 topics did the NNS group do the same; and with the other 17 topics, different questions were raised by the NNS subjects to seek information from their native interlocutors. Thus, although the Chinese subjects appeared active in raising general questions, such as enquiries about local places, or British culture, these topic initiations did not always make them the active conversationalists; instead, their native interlocutors were given the opportunity to dominate the conversational turns while they provided the
required information.

A contrasting pattern showed up in the NNS group’s active involvement in “personal information seeking/providing” topics. As Table 2 reveals, despite the fact that the NS group had started more topics in this category, it was the NNS group who featured a dominant position in 13 such topics, as compared with the NS group’s dominant position in only 4 “personal information seeking/providing” topics. The common topics under this category include questions about the Chinese subjects’ life, study and travel in the UK. While most of these “personal information-seeking” topics were genuinely initiated out of the NS participants’ intention to get to know the NNS participants, some of the topics were likely to be utilized to fill the “conversational gap” when no other interesting topics seemed to appear. Such an assumption was based on the observation that some of the “personal information seeking” topics bore little relevance to their immediate previous topics. An example is offered here (refer to Appendix for the transcription key adopted in this study):

(1) Topic 8 in C1: “Going to places”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>NS (T)</th>
<th>NNS (C)</th>
<th>NNS (L)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>T:</td>
<td>And I remember one day—only been there for a while, I came out of the school, and I thought: “Oh it’s, a very nice day.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>L:</td>
<td>&lt;laughs&gt; but it’s the same!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>T:</td>
<td>It’s the same, exactly the same &lt;laughs&gt;. No difference, you know=</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>L:</td>
<td>=Mm=</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>T:</td>
<td>=They thought I was very strange.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>(2.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>T:</td>
<td>So how about Southampton? Have you, been outside of Southampton?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>C:</td>
<td>Yeah. I have been I have been to Brighton, and Bath, and Bristol, and… Oxford, and Isle of Wight. That’s it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>T:</td>
<td>Oh, that’s=</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>C:</td>
<td>=And I’m planning to New Forest, maybe, in May 2005. Yeah, and I, I still want to visit Bournemouth, then maybe Portsmouth.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>T:</td>
<td>Okay=</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>C:</td>
<td>=I want to go around</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>T:</td>
<td>Oh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>C:</td>
<td>Around Southampton. I like travel.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>T:</td>
<td>[You do?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>C:</td>
<td>[Very much, yeah.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The extract in Example (1) is taken from C1. The topic “going to places” (Topic 8 in C1) starts from Line 7 when Tony (T), the only NS participant in C1, asked the two NNS participants (C stands for Cheng; L stands for Lin) whether they had been to anywhere
around the city of Southampton. Previously, Tony told a story about “the weather in Africa”. Tony’s conversational dominance was obvious, as his utterances had taken up most of the talk. Although Lin (L) back-channeled with utterances “oh” and “mm”, her conversational involvement was minimal. At the end of the story, Tony’s comment that “they thought I was very strange” (Line 6) received no feedback from his co-conversationalists. Instead, a significant silence of 2.8 seconds appeared before Tony changed the topic by asking a personal question about the NNS subjects, as revealed in Line 7. As Example (1) shows, Tony’s question successfully invited active involvement from Cheng in the new topic (see Lines 7-18).

The topics under the category of “opinion seeking/providing” showed a tendency to follow the positive link between topic initiation and active conversational involvement. This was because most of the topics were started with opinion providing rather than opinion seeking. On the whole, the NNS group initiated more “opinion related” topics than the NS group. Of the 16 topics initiated by the NNS group, 10 were “opinion providing” by nature. The NS group, on the other hand, were found to seek opinions from the NNS subjects in 7 topics out of the total number of 8. It was not a surprise, therefore, that the NNS group was found to be very active under this category. NS dominance only occurred in 3 topics. Two broad types of opinion were offered by the NNS subjects: talks about one’s feelings and attitudes in general and comments made on daily observations. Comments made on the latter tended to appear in the last three conversations.

The lack of “gossiping” and “chat” topics in most of the recorded NS-NNS conversations may simply reflect the fact that the NNS subjects and the NS participants were new acquaintances rather than established friends. What is significant is the uneven distribution of “observation” topics across the six conversations. The first four conversations altogether, featured only 7 topic initiations under this category made by the NNS subjects, with a lesser number where the NNS subjects were found to be active. A different pattern was shown in C5 and C6, however, as the NNS subjects not only negotiated an impressive number of “observation” topics; they also managed to stay active and even dominant in most of these topics. The higher number of topic initiation in C5 and C6 under this particular genre may result from the longer length of the last two conversations, as compared to C1, C2 and C3. What made C5 and C6 significant, however, were the varying natures of these “observation” topics, as a wide range of “observations” were negotiated in the conversations, including talks on movies, gardening programs on TV, doing exercises, the law systems in England, and so on. There were also observations made on daily life, such as “the baby ducks on campus” and “the sports facilities at the University”, indicating the speakers’ intention to look for shared common ground.

5. Discussion

Drawing on data from NS-NNS casual conversations, this study has expanded on the existing studies that are traditionally based on monolingual talks among native speakers of English, who are often family members, friends, or colleagues (e.g., Eggins & Slade,
Exploring the Link Between Topic Initiation and Chinese Learner Involvement in NS-NNS Casual Conversations

1997; Tannen, 1989). The findings show differences in the participants’ choice of topic initiation between NS-NNS interaction and NS-NS interaction. While native speakers prefer to establish solidarity through “story-telling”, “observation”, “gossiping” and “chats” in NS-NS interaction, they showed a tendency to raise personal questions about the NNS participants in this study. The NNS participants, on the other hand, produced more general inquiries about the target culture, language, and people. With both types of topics, however, the participants’ topic initiation did not lead to their active conversational involvement, indicating different conversational agendas for participants involved in NS-NNS interaction.

If one of the main purposes of a casual talk among native speakers is to establish common ground and to further consolidate it, the model of NS-NNS interaction shows almost the opposite, decided by the limited sociocultural resources shared between the NNS participants and their native speaking interlocutors. By seeking information about “the unknown”, such as British culture and the local places and food, the NNS subjects not only offered their NS interlocutors the opportunity to take the dominant role in the talk, but also helped to construct the NS participants’ social roles as the more experienced and more knowledgeable conversationalists. This was further confirmed by the fact that the NS group had also taken the initiative to provide information.

The findings also suggest that the mere fact of getting involved in a conversation does not naturally increase L2 learners’ self-confidence as co-conversationalists. With “personal information seeking/providing” topics, it might be natural for the NS group to initially enquire about the local places that the NNS subjects had been to, taking the social position as hosts. But interestingly, the NNS subjects’ touring experiences provided the focus for talk throughout the other five conversations, recorded at different stages of the study. This shows such topics were “safe ground” in NS-NNS conversations: there was always something that the NNS subjects could talk about, in spite of the individual differences and the different conversational contexts involved.

However, according to Hatch (1983), although initially L2 learners may want to talk about, or even depend on “canned topics”, such as how long they have been in the country, their reactions to the country, what school courses they are taking, their occupations and so on, they need to move beyond the stage where discourse is predictable with familiar and practiced topics. Thus, although the NNS subjects’ active involvement invited by the NS group may have achieved the functional role in keeping the conversation going, the perception of lack of common ground between the two groups was instantly constructed. Such questions were at times raised by the native speakers simply to keep the conversation going when a silence was likely to take place, indicating the functional purpose of this type of topic initiation in NS-NNS interaction, differing from the many social purposes of topic initiation that are commonly identified in the model of NS-NS interaction.

In a similar way, the tendency among those in the NS group to seek opinion from the NNS participant was phenomenal, as “opinion seeking” is also not often found among peers, as the fairly relaxed conversational atmosphere means participants are more likely to provide their opinions without them being sought. It is between people who are not acquainted enough that opinions are sought to bridge the knowledge gap, or simply, the
conversational gap. An example can be found in C2, when Steve (S) asked Lin (L) about her attitude towards English food:

### (2) Extract from Topic 26 in C2

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Do you like English food? It's terrible, isn't it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>No, no, not terrible. Some of them are quite nice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Really?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Mm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Shall I turn this off? ( ). Yeah, I want to go to China soon.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The question was spontaneous, in contrast to the previous topic between Chinese food and English food. But it was also functional in that it was something to talk about to sustain the conversation. This was based on the observation that Steve quickly moved to another irrelevant topic without going into details when Lin said that “some of them (English foods) are quite nice” (Line 2). Therefore, “opinion seeking” carried a similar role as “(personal) information seeking” at times, that is, to invite the NNS subjects for conversational involvement, only it could be more “face-threatening”. It was perhaps for this exact reason that the NS group chose to ask about the NNS subjects’ personal preferences rather than about their opinions on world views. The fact that the participants tended to agree with each other may have further confirmed the two groups as “non-intimate” based on the previous discussion that disagreement demonstrates the solidarity of a relationship (Schiffrin, 1990: 256). To compare, the NNS group’s ability to offer more opinions on daily observations in C4 and C6 may result from their newly established common ground with the target language group.

The positive link between topic initiation and conversational involvement under the topic genre of “observation” has important implications for L2 learners. That is, L2 learners’ topic initiation is likely to lead to their conversational involvement in the subsequent talk. More importantly, the fact that L2 learners are sharing views about the world in which they live with native speaking interlocutors creates a sense of shared common ground. However, as the results of this study show, not all the subjects’ attempts to share their observations were successful, because they did not always possess the necessary knowledge repertoire to make conversational contributions. This confirms the existing view that conversationalists do not always share equal choices or rights regarding what they can talk about in a casual conversation (Eggins & Slade, 1997). This unequal position in social interaction, on the other hand, resituates its conversational participants as their interpersonal relations are immediately reassessed.

This study has, therefore, shown with evidence of casual conversations held among native speakers of English that NS-NNS casual conversation is also a critical linguistic site for the negotiation of social roles and interpersonal relations. Unlike the model of NS-NS interaction though, the conversational participants may struggle harder to keep their conversation going at times in NS-NNS casual conversations, and this in turn, affects the way social roles and interpersonal relations are constructed at a micro-level. The findings of this
study thus contribute to our understanding of NS-NNS causal conversation as a particular type of social practice, which is unique in its own right and deserves further studies.

6. Conclusion and implications

The three subjects in this study represent competent L2 learners who are able to get involved in meaningful conversation with native speakers. However, the subjects’ confidence and fluency were likely to be topic related, or genre related. For example, they were confident and fluent in talking about their lives and their studies in the target language. As such, they appeared to be more at ease dealing with “personal information providing”, and at times, being able to invite “information providing” from their native-speaking co-participants through question elicitation. However, for topics that require a shared common ground among the conversational participants such as in “observation”, the subjects all together showed a less active role during the first four conversations. The fact that most of the “observation” topics appeared only in C5 and C6 suggests that the shared common ground between the two groups came only over time, based on the NNS subjects’ increased sociocultural knowledge of the target language country.

L2 learners do not enter a conversation with a priori definition of what is shared between them. Rather, the sense of shared common ground is gradually established while the conversationalists work together to initiate and construct conversational topics. Thus, L2 learners’ inability to make a conversational contribution to NS-NNS interaction not only reduces their self-confidence in communication, but also challenges their self-perceived social and psychological distance from the target language group.

The study has therefore shed some light on second language acquisition from a wider aspect which addresses the interrelationship between language use and its sociocultural contexts. This social perspective is necessary if we consider L2 learners as social beings who, according to Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000: 155), “have intentions, agency, affect, and above all histories” that are bound to interact with their L2 learning. Future studies are thus called for taking a further step to investigate how such studies inform our understanding of the linguistic development of L2 learners. This is in line with the increasing number of studies in recent years that have worked towards a broader research agenda to take on board both the social and cognitive aspects of second language learning.

References


### Appendix  Transcription key/conventions for transcribing the six  NS-NNS conversations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Meaning and description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.</td>
<td>certainty, completion, with falling intonation followed by noticeable pause (as at the end of a declarative sentence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no end of turn punctuation</td>
<td>implies non-termination, with no final intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>uncertainty with rising intonation followed by noticeable pause (as at the end of an interrogative sentence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>`</td>
<td>Parceling of talk or breathing time with continuing intonation: may be slight rise or fall in contour (less than “.” or “?”); may be followed by a pause (shorter than “.” or “?”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>!</td>
<td>“surprised” intonation or animated tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbol</td>
<td>Meaning and description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.4)</td>
<td>pause, time gap in four tenths of a second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>brief pause or time gap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td>sound is held, or short hesitation within a turn (less than three seconds), e.g., yes...; noticeable pause or break in rhythm without falling intonation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( )</td>
<td>untranscribable talk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(the rain)</td>
<td>transcriber’s guess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>=</td>
<td>latching, one sound seems tied to the next</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[</td>
<td>point of overlapping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;laughs&gt;</td>
<td>descriptive comment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/a/</td>
<td>phonetic transcription</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;laughter&gt; without attributing to particular individuals</td>
<td>unrecognizable source</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Copy editing: Janet Roberts)