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Performing to be Appropriate: Negotiation, Construction and Display of Performed L2 Identities of Adult ESL Learners

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INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of the concept of communicative competence (Hymes 1972a, 1972b), the field of language teaching has been focusing not only on the development of general linguistic competence, but also on the development of knowledge and skills that allow a speaker to communicate appropriately within particular social settings. However, after more than two decades since the concept of communicative competence was applied to language teaching (c.f., Paulston as cited in Savignon 1983; Canale & Swain 1980; Canale 1983), the process of teaching communicative competence has generated a considerable amount of discussion regarding the difficulty of learning it (c.f., Cohen & Olshtain 1981; Eisenstein & Bodman 1986; Billmyer, Jakar & Lee 1989; Wolfson 1989; Billmyer 1990; Olshtain & Cohen 1991), the feasibility of teaching it (c.f., Paulston as cited in Savignon 1983:25; Hornberger 1989:229; Saville-Troike 1996:364) and the adequacy of teaching and learning it (c.f., Fairclough 1989; Kramsch 1991, 1993; Chick 1996).

One complication in discussions about teaching and learning communicative competence is, as Kramsch (1991) points out, that the cultural aspects of language learning are not something the educator can demand the learner take on, rather, the learner constantly makes decisions as to what to choose to incorporate into their repertoire. In the process of acquiring a L2 (second language), learners constantly negotiate what types of L2 characteristics to incorporate, and what types of L1 (first language) characteristics to maintain in speaking L2 in L2 culture in order to be understood as appropriate. In this article I refer to these various charac-

teristics available in L2 that learners can engage in to display their L2 identities as a “performance style,” and the identity displayed through these performance styles as a “performed identity.” The process of choosing what identity to perform involves both conscious and unconscious choices that are heavily constrained by a sociopolitical context (c.f., Labov 1966, Gal 1978; Hornberger 1988).

Regarding the learners’ choices, Kramsch (1991:13) identified three possibilities: (1) assimilating into the existing dominant social structure deliberately and consciously, (2) rejecting assimilation into the mainstream social practice, (3) creating an alternative personal and national identity. Educators also face the dilemma of whether they should train students to fit into the preexisting social structure, or to train them to play an active role to shape it (Auerbach 1995).

The present study examines students’ linguistic performance of appropriateness in an adult ESL classroom. Integrating ethnographic observations with discourse analyses it particularly deals with how they negotiate, construct and display their L2 identities in the course of learning appropriate language behavior in American English.

THE STUDY

Data for the study was collected as part of a larger ethnographic, discourse analytic study which lasted 8 months. However, the data used in this study primarily came from the last 14 weeks.

The Research Site

Data collection was conducted in an adult ESL classroom that was part of an English Language Program in a university. The university is located in a metropolitan city on the east coast of the United States, which consists of a diverse population in both socioeconomic status and ethnicity. The city provides students with opportunities to expose themselves to a variety of conversational styles of English outside of the school. The city also has a number of sites that can provide the students with insights into the historical background of the United States.

The class was offered as an elective for advanced students. The curriculum emphasized the particularity of the course, stating that the major goal of the class was to develop students’ appropriate speech behavior in American English that general ESL courses cannot sufficiently focus on. In order to meet the objective the class included various activities such as learning and practicing idioms and gambits, practicing and analyzing roleplays, and close observation and analyses of everyday conversations. The class met for one hour, four times a week throughout a

seven week session.

Participants

The participants for the study came from two sessions of the course, including two teachers and twenty-six students. Each teacher taught one session, the first session had twelve students and the second session had fourteen students. I was at the classroom as an observer, but did not participate in the classroom activities.

The majority of the students (19 out of 26) were Korean. The others included Japanese (4), Taiwanese (1), Brazilian (1), and West African (Ivory Coast; 1). Only two students were non-Asian. The distribution in nationality was not usual for this program. The program considered this heavy representation of Korean students to be due to the booming economy in Korea at the time the study was conducted. Eighteen students were female and eight were male. One student, whose length of stay in the United States was the shortest, had arrived two weeks before the course started. Otherwise, the students' length of stay ranged between two and twelve months. The ages of the students were from nineteen to thirty-three years old. All the students were either university students or university graduates. The program considers their student population to be fairly educated.

The teachers who taught this course were at the forefront of the TESOL field, each holding a Master's degree in TESOL, with one of them now pursuing a doctoral degree in Educational Linguistics. Both of the teachers who participated in this study were female, one is American and the other is non-American. The American teacher's native language is English. The non-American teacher speaks a language other than English at home, yet describes English as her best language since the medium of all education that she has received was in English.

Data Collection, Analysis and Conceptualization

As data collection methods, classroom observation, machine-recordings that included both audio and video recordings, interviews with the teachers and the students and a questionnaire with the students were employed. During the two sessions (total 14 weeks), 27 hours of classroom observations were conducted. All the observed classes were audio recorded and 6 of them were video taped. Interviews with the participants were conducted both formally and informally. The formal interviews were audio recorded.

While collecting data, I analyzed the collected data, hence the data collection and analyses were an ongoing process. In order to gain insight into locally occurring events in the classroom,

Hymes (1990) states that it is essential to go back and forth between the etic (outsider's) and emic (insider's) points of view. The distinction between emic and etic was first introduced in the study of phonology by Pike (1967) and was later incorporated into studies of ethnography. When I entered the research site, I brought with me my etic view that had been constructed through my experience as an ESL student and a Japanese language teacher together with the literature that I had read. While endeavoring to gain an emic interpretation through observations, video and audio recordings of the classroom, interviews and questionnaires with the participants, I constantly went back to my etic view and restructured it. I will briefly discuss this process.

When I first started to conduct the observations, I noticed that there were certain patterns in the students' performances. I always found a group of students who were obviously trying to act like Americans¹. At the same time, I also found that there was a group of students who seemed to be performing a more native-language-like identity while speaking in English. Since these observations were solely based on my intuition, I started to search for evidence for what led me to perceive these differences.

Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982:8-9) suggest gaining qualitative insights regarding participants' unconscious use of discourse strategies. I transcribed the recorded data and closely examined the speech behaviors of these two groups in various speech events such as roleplay situations, pair discussions and whole class discussions. This process of analysis revealed that there are some linguistic markers that are only present in the group which I perceived as performing like Americans. Based on my observations and the participants' perceptions elicited through interview, I found that these linguistic markers were functioning as contextualization cues (Gumperz 1982) that characterize a person's speech as either performing American identity or performing native-language identity. However, my observations of the students and my intuition were still telling me that there was further diversity within the groups. Specifically, I did not perceive some students' performance as "American" in spite of their extensive incorporation of the linguistic markers of performing American identity. This led me to question what makes me perceive these students differently.

In order to answer this question I interviewed the students regarding what they think about America, how they feel studying American English, how they feel speaking American English, and how different it is from speaking their native language. I also asked whose or what type of English is the students' model in order to uncover how much they are motivated to assimilate into the American speech style. These data provided me with the insight that each student has a

different degree of orientation towards performing American identity. For example, some students have a positive image of the United States and American culture, and they express their desire to adjust their speech style in order to sound more “American.” On the other hand, there is another orientation that rejects assimilation into American culture. Students who have this orientation tend to have less positive or sometimes a negative image of the United States and American culture, and they comment that they do not see the need to sound American.

In addition to the interviews with the students, I also reexamined my recorded data of classroom interactions employing Bateson’s (1972) and Goffman’s (1974) notion of frame. Goffman defines frame or primary framework as “one that is seen as rendering what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful” (Goffman 1974:21). For example, people can interpret a characteristic of a speech activity as either serious or joking based on how the speech activity was framed. It appeared to me that these students’ orientations and framings made the students’ performances look different even though they employed the same linguistic markers for their performance. For example, among the students who incorporated linguistic markers for performing American identity, if the students were oriented towards performing American identity, their framing tended to be interpreted as more serious, and they were also more likely to be perceived as performing American identity. On the other hand, if the students were not oriented towards performing American identity, they tended not to hide characteristics of their native-language identity. Thus, because of the mismatch of two different performed identities, the linguistic markers of performing American identity stood out and were often interpreted as play or joking.

In order to more clearly understand the dynamic nature of the students’ performance of their identities in the classroom, I constructed a conceptualized model (see Figure 1). Note that this conceptualization is based on recorded data of students’ speech behavior, my classroom observations and some insights I gained through interviews.

In Figure 1, the vertical line represents the amount of linguistic evidence for performing American identity. If a student uses more of these markers, the performance style is placed in the upper end of the diagram. The horizontal line represents the degree of orientation towards performing American identity. As the line goes from left to right, it shows that the performance is more oriented towards performing American identity. Thus, these two lines divide the performance style into four groups.

Performing American identity requires the significant presence of linguistic evidence and also a strong orientation towards performing American identity. Performing forged identity

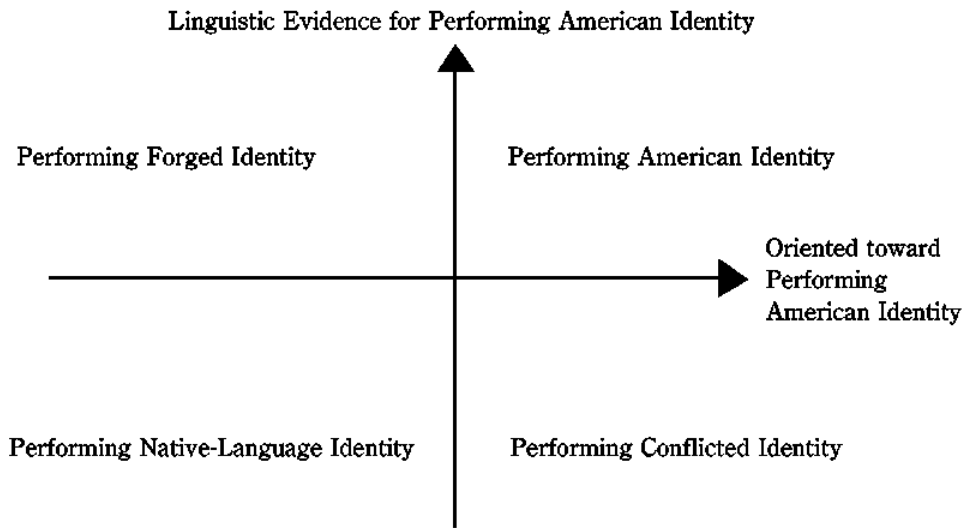


Figure 1 A Conceptualization of Student Choices of Performed Identity

uses a large number of linguistic markers for performing American identity, but is weaker in orientation towards performing American identity. Performing native-language identity has few linguistic markers for performing American identity and a weak orientation towards performing American identity. Performing conflicted identity, although oriented towards performing American identity, does not noticeably show any linguistic markers for performing American identity.

I would like to emphasize that this diagram is not a static representation of the students themselves. In other words, I do not intend to state that a particular student can be placed on a particular position of the diagram in a static way. Based on my observations and examinations of the data, some student performances were found in each quadrant of the diagram. While these performances can well represent the characteristics of the four major categories, some student performances clustered around the middle or moved on the diagram, changing their performance style to some degree, and were thus less clearly identifiable as distinctly within one of the categories. Nevertheless, I argue that every individual's performance at any given moment is located somewhere in the diagram. I will provide detailed illustrations of the dynamic nature of the students' choice of performance style in the next part.

Four Categories of Student Performance

In this section I will briefly discuss the four categories of student performance. In order to illustrate the characteristics of each category more clearly, I will focus on one student for each category whose employment of the performance style was salient and extensive, and was representative of other students' performances as well.²

Performing American Identity

Whenever I started to observe a new session, I always encountered at least one student who persistently employed this performance style. Jennie³'s performance is an extreme example of this category, taking on many of the characteristics of performing American identity. While I was observing the class she was constantly using this performance style in many types of activities. She also performed American identity while I was interviewing her.

Jennie is from Korea and had been in the United States for six months when the course started. She is a college student majoring in psychology back in Korea. There are several factors that mark her performance as performing American identity. The first is her use of an American name, "Jennie". The use of an American name seemed to be concealing her native-language identity and symbolizing her new identity. During the interview she repeatedly stressed her attempts to speak like a native speaker. It looked like she was trying to make her English sound like an "American." She has more variations in tones compared to other students, which makes her English sound more target-like. Her English is also perceived as more target-like, or as good English, by the teacher and other students. However, these students' attitudes towards her attempt to sound like an American are not necessarily positive. While some students admired her efforts, others stated that her performance was disgusting.

Jennie possesses a variety of lexical items that mark a person as performing American identity such as "wow," "oh," "ah," "oops," "well," "you know," "uh hum," "oh my god" and "oh my goodness." She inserts these linguistic markers in her conversations and they make her speech sound more "American." Jennie also has a backchanneling marker "uh hum" whereas those who do not perform American identity use either "yes" or "yeah." Another characteristic of performing American identity is the use of various reduced-forms such as "gonna," "wanna" and "gotta." Linguistic behavior of performing American identity also includes marked vocabulary such as "buddy," "man," and "you guys."

During interviews with Jennie, I discovered that she exhibited a lot of linguistic markers for performing American identity because of her strong orientation towards performing Ameri-

can identity. She repeatedly said “get close to the attitude of native speakers” on various occasions as an important factor in improving her English. It seems that she was trying to observe native speakers’ behavior carefully outside of the classroom, and was incorporating her findings into her repertoire. She is aware that some of her classmates do not necessarily have favorable attitudes towards her attempts, but she flatly stated that “I shouldn’t worry how other people think.”

According to her, she decided not to worry about other people’s perceptions in her pursuit to improve her English. She sometimes criticized other Korean students who were not trying to incorporate American speech behavior saying they are wasting a good opportunity of being in the United States.

In spite of the tension created among Korean students, she is pushing herself to incorporate characteristics of American speech style and is displaying them believing that this is the best way to improve her English. She also believes that it is necessary to perform American identity in order to be perceived as appropriate in American society.

Performing Forged Identity

This performance is characterized by significant employment of linguistic markers for performing American identity with weaker orientation towards performing American identity. As compared to the previously mentioned performance that tries to conceal characteristics of the native-language identity, this performance maintains some characteristics of one’s native-language identity while incorporating linguistic markers for performing American identity. Therefore, when a student employs this performance style it can be interpreted that the student is trying to present a different identity by using linguistic markers associated with performing American identity, while not necessarily oriented towards assimilating into an American speech style.

A male Korean student, Sangho, is one of the students who often employed this performance style. He is a college student in Korea majoring in sociology. He had been in the United States for seven months when the class started.

He incorporates many of the linguistic markers previously discussed as performing American identity. However, although he used these linguistic markers his performance looked very different from Jennie’s. He did not appear to me to be performing American identity. I started to wonder why I was interpreting these two performances differently.

The first marked behavior of Sangho is his exaggerated body language discussed earlier as

a characteristic of performing American identity. For example, he raised his shoulders with his hands palm up when he said "I don't know." However, it did not look natural, and always made his classmates laugh. In addition, Sangho incorporates a number of marked expressions in his repertoire.

While I was observing his performance in the classroom I started to believe that his use of linguistic markers for performing American identity functioned as a contextualization cue to frame the event as play. In other words, in contrast to Jennie, who tries to use linguistic markers for performing American identity to "get close to native speaker," students such as Sangho who perform forged identity often try to use these linguistic markers to frame the event as "joking."

It seems that as opposed to people who incorporate the style of performing American identity and who use linguistic markers in order to acquire the feelings of people who use them, people who perform forged identity consider these linguistic markers as mere linguistic tools devoid of emotion. However, the use of these linguistic markers without orientation towards performing American was often interpreted as funny behavior by the participants.

According to Sangho, his performance style had been changing over the course of his stay in the United States and he was constantly experimenting with what is the most appropriate and effective performance style, especially in order to improve his English. However, he started to realize something was wrong with his performance after five months of attempting to perform American identity. It may be that this realization lowered his orientation towards performing American identity and he decided to use a style that he considered original, which resulted in creating his new identity.

Performing Native-Language Identity

This performance style contains little linguistic evidence for performing American identity, and performers who employ this performance do not express a desire to adjust their speech behavior in order to sound "American." My first impressions of the students who incorporated this performance style were either that they were unwilling to learn American speech behavior or were less competent learners. However, in the course of interviewing these students I started to believe that these students also created an identity for speaking English drawing on and choosing to display characteristics of their native-language.

While I was observing the class, Shen, a male Taiwanese student, struck me as a student who uses this performance style most of the time. Shen had been in the United States for six

months when the course started. He has an MBA (Masters of Business Administration) degree from a university in Taiwan and has working experience as a businessman in Taiwan. Compared to other students he looked mature, and his participation in the classroom activities looked to me to be very serious and motivated.

Shen almost never showed linguistic markers that were discussed as performing American identity. Although he communicated effectively, and his production was generally well-formed, his lack of markers for performing American identity gave me the impression that his English is less-target like.

When I interviewed Shen, he expressed that he was avoiding the use of expressions that were introduced as appropriate in American culture, believing that he can rely on his intuition for judging appropriateness instead of using prefabricated expressions. He believes that since all human feelings are the same, as long as he maintains behavior that is appropriate in his own culture, it would be appropriate in American culture as well. Since he believes that appropriateness in his own culture is in most cases applicable to American culture, he often expressed a critical view of classroom activities designed to learn appropriateness in American culture.

It seems that Shen's view for learning appropriateness is based on his own theory for learning language. He claims that the information that a manner book introduces would be sufficient. In addition, he believes that the use of the expressions he learned in textbooks is only needed for superficial relationships, which he does not want.

It seems that Shen perceives that he does not have many opportunities to use the expressions that he learned among the circle of his close friends because he said that he only associates with classmates in ELP, other Taiwanese students in particular.

Performing Conflicted Identity

This performance style does not show a lot of linguistic markers for performing American identity, which tends to make an observer perceive this performance style as the same as performing native-language identity. However, based on the interview data, performers in this category are motivated to adjust their speech style to what they see as American. In this sense, their performance is oriented towards performing American identity. My observations and examinations of the data suggest that there are some issues that prevent students from performing American identity even though they have a motivation to do so. It seems that students perform conflicted identity as a result of conflict between their desire to perform American identity and an environment that does not allow them to perform American identity. I will discuss this per-

formance style through introducing interview data elicited from Seong, a female Korean student, since she expressed the reason for using this performance style most explicitly.

During my observations of the class, it took a while for me to start paying attention to Seong. She was the type of student who blends in. She was always quiet and never actively participated in the classroom activities. During an interview, the teacher described her as unmotivated to learn American culture. My impression of Seong was similar to the teacher's. Although she was doing classroom activities and following the instructions, it looked to me as though she was unenthusiastic. Thus, when Seong appeared for the interview with me, I was surprised to see a very different Seong. She was very talkative, and the entire interview was dominated by her story.

Her story started with how she was interested in studying English. According to her, she studied at an English program in Indiana the year before, and this was her second time to study English in the United States. She also had an American tutor back in Korea who had given her special training in English conversation. She said that she is planning to come to the United States every year to study English. I was surprised to hear her say "I love to be in the United States."

While I was interviewing her, I was becoming interested in the discrepancy between what she wants to do and what she was actually doing in the classroom. Particularly, I became curious as to what made her perform a very reserved self in the classroom despite her desire for performing American identity. I mentioned to her my impression of her in the classroom, then she commented "I don't feel uncomfortable doing like a native speaker because I want to be like native speaker, but it's very hard to do it in front of other Korean students." According to her, she has a totally different face outside of the classroom if other Korean students are not present. She seems to be enjoying performing a different identity, but a place with Korean students does not allow her to try out a different identity. Seong complained that even in the classroom where students are supposed to practice American speech behavior, it was difficult to try out performing American identity. During the interview, she mentioned many times how she enjoyed the experience in Indiana the year before since there were very few Korean students there.

Since my observations were limited to classroom interactions, I cannot definitively comment on her performing a different identity outside the classroom. However, her claims are reasonable, especially in light of theoretical claims that identity is multi-faceted, constructed, negotiated and chosen to display depending on a context and an interlocutor (Kramsch 1991; Glass 1992; Ochs 1993; Bucholtz & Hall 1995). Seong seems to have constructed a certain identi-

ty that she conceives of as “American”, and she seems to be constantly negotiating which identity to display, either American or native-language identity. In this process of negotiation, the presence of Korean people hinders her display of a different identity.

She believes that she needs to overcome her discomfort with performing American identity. She said that she will have an American name the next time she comes to the United States to study, and will try not to worry about what other Korean students think of her.

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the study described, interpreted and explained the students’ choices of performed identities in a classroom. I believe the findings of the study shed light on discussions of difficulty, feasibility and adequacy of teaching and learning communicative competence.

First, the study demonstrated differences in student effort for incorporating American speech behavior in order to be an appropriate speaker. My analyses not only showed that the process involves simple imitations of native speaker norms, but also that significant decisions were made both consciously and unconsciously. Moreover, the students’ views towards appropriate speech behavior were not only constructed through their views towards images of American English and American culture in the outside world, but also their view of appropriate behavior in a classroom context. Kasper and Schmidt (1996:156) acknowledge that L2 learners’ total convergence to the target speech norm may not be desirable from either the native or the non-native speakers’ perspectives. This suggests that there is a gap between the so called “target” and appropriate speech behavior for a L2 learner. It seems that analyses of learner language at the sociolinguistic and pragmatic level have been conducted based on the assumption that miscommunication occurs because of the learner’s imperfect mastery of the native speaker norm. However, the present study suggests an interesting possibility, that the learner can be appropriate producing speech that does not match the native speaker norm. In other words, there may be many ways to be appropriate without replacing their original speech behavior with native speaker norms. Thus, I believe that many studies still need to be conducted to discover the mechanisms of communication and miscommunication in a global context, studies that could shed light on the development of learner language without replacing the learner’s native-language identity.

Second, findings of the present study suggest that the participants’ preceptions of more or less target-like speech were heavily influenced not only by sociolinguistic or pragmatic aspects of what Gumperz (1982) calls core features of language, but also marginal features or linguistic

markers that affect the expressive quality of speech. As marginal features, I identified some linguistic markers that signal the speaker's language as "American," and it seems that the construction of the impressions that judge speech as being either more or less target-like were influenced by what I call linguistic markers for performing American identity.

In the area of interlanguage pragmatics an attempt is made to measure how close the learner's language is to the target language norms (Kasper & Schmidt 1996) based on the core features, which tends to exclude the impact of marginal features. However, the findings of the present study suggest that people's perceptions and judgements of target-like are not only based on the structural forms but also on holistic impressions, and it seems that marginal features of language, or linguistic markers for performing American identity, influence the holistic impressions.

Finally, this study found that in a classroom for learning a second language where the sociolinguistic aspects of language learning were emphasized, the participants consciously or unconsciously chose to perform identities that are negotiated and constructed. I believe that this finding of learners' choice of performed identities will inform discussion on issues regarding interpretations of the concept of communicative competence.

When Canale and Swain (1980) adapted Hymes' (1972a, 1972b) concept of communicative competence to language teaching it was assumed that the proposed four components, grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence would be teachable. However, in the course of implementing a communicative approach, a number of researchers started to question the teachability of communicative competence in classroom settings (c.f., Paulston as cited in Savignon 1983:25; Hornberger 1989:229; Saville-Troike 1996:364). I suggest that the application of the concept of communicative competence needs to incorporate the learner's choice into the model for teaching, giving consideration to the impact of the sociopolitical context that constrains the learner's choices.

In addition, language teachers need to consider the learners' choice of performed identities when they evaluate student performance. As Hornberger (1989:217) pointed out, there is a problem in defining "ability for use" in the concept of communicative competence. Hornberger (1989:226) interprets it as "the individual's potential to realize a possible, feasible, and appropriate speech act, not to the realization itself." In this sense, the speaker's ability cannot be evaluated based on what they actually perform. Hornberger (1989:229) uses the term "performed ability" to refer to the ability that is actually realized. This notion is related to my discussion of "performed identity" that does not necessarily reflect the speaker's knowledge, but

rather their choices. Many of the students in the present study expressed a discrepancy between their knowledge and what they can actually do. There are many factors that prevent speakers from applying their knowledge to their performance. This suggests that applications of the concept of communicative competence to language teaching need to reconsider whether or not the native target can or should be an appropriate goal for learners. In this sense, the term interlanguage that assumes a guiding of learners to fit into the preexisting native speaker conventions, also needs to be problematized.

NOTES

- 1) I use American to refer either to my etic view of American or the students' assumptions and expectations for Americans, not the general concept of American.
- 2) Because of space limitation, I will provide only a few examples from my data. See Kubota (1998) for extensive discussions and examples.
- 3) In order to conceal the participants' identity, I use pseudonyms for all the participants. To decide what pseudonyms to use, I chose a name that is also a name in the participant's country. However, for the participants who use or have an American name, I chose another American name.

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