

Gender Differentiation in the Application of Hesitation Strategies among EFL Learners

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Abstract: In the recent years there has been a striking shift in both academic and popular discourse on the subject of male–female differences. The present paper reports a study which carried out to investigate how both gender groups of EFL learners deal with language difficulties during speech by focusing on the hesitation strategies they employ. Obviously, the effective use of a target language to build interpersonal communication where communicative failures naturally occur, involves the effective use of communication strategies. This study mainly focuses on the pattern of hesitation strategies in oral L2 test among a group of Iranian university students at a public university in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia as EFL participants of the study. Adopting a qualitative research, a group of 12 Iranian university students including 5 males and 5 females were selected as the subjects of the study. The findings of this research contribute to a descriptive account of the type and frequency of hesitation discourse markers used by the participants in problematic moments of L2 oral test in consideration of their gender while struggling with language difficulties across different sections of an oral L2 test.

Keywords: hesitation strategies, gender, EFL learners, oral test

1. Introduction

According to Taron (1980) language is the “collective knowledge of its speakers” which implies that we are not able to find any perfect knowledge of language for any one. Even native speakers employ different strategies to convey what they mean. (Tarone, 1980). Therefore, if we consider the native speaker’s knowledge of language as imperfect, then L2 speakers will definitely cope with bigger communication problems, and obviously less proficient learners will be more in trouble with. (Kaivanpanah, Yamouty, & Karami, 2012:p1)

According to, Dörnyei and Scott (1997) “the early interest in communication strategies originated from the identification of mismatch between the linguistic resources in the L2 speaker’s cognitive and communicative intentions. This mismatch arouse some systematic language phenomena which basically emerges to resolve and handle difficulties or breakdowns in communication”. (Kaivanpanah et al, 2012:p2)

Disfluencies have been mostly considered as negative phenomenon which only functions to interrupt communication and waste listener’s time. However, studies have suggested an opposite idea which argues that disfluencies might contribute to build an efficient communication by providing extra time for the speakers to plan, and inform the attentive listeners about the speakers’ mental attitudes or planning difficulties. In other words, while the listeners are expecting the speaker to carry on speech, they do not take turn and instead they might comprehend speaker’s reason of hesitation and predict the coming utterance which will finally end to two possibilities: whether to prepare for it or offer help to the speaker to resolve the difficulty. (Clark, 2002; Shriberg, 2005; Stenstroem, 1994). According to some studies, filled pauses have been discovered quite frequently in dis-preferred responses or embarrassing remarks.

(Finegan, 1994; Rose, 1998; Sadanobu and Takubo, 1995). (Watanabe, Hirose, Den, & Minematsu, 2007)

They have also been known as strategic devices which signal an interlocutor of the speaker’s under construction utterance. It has also been characterized as the automatic effect resulting from cognitive burdens, specially while managing speech production as doing other tasks. (Nicholson, Gurman, Lickley, Anderson, Mullin, Kenicer, & Smallwood, 2003)

Obviously, spontaneous speech contains all kinds of disfluency phenomena such as silent pauses, hesitations, repetitions, fillers, grammatical errors, mis-selected lexical items, self-corrections, prolongations, false starts, slips of the tongue, etc., which are all because of some disharmony between speech planning and execution stage. In fact, speech disfluencies are defined as phenomena interrupting the flow of speech without adding propositional contents to an utterance. (Menyhárt, 2003)

1.1 Mechanism of disfluencies

Disfluencies usually occur in stuttering, blocks, prolongations, hesitations; (part of/complete) word repetitions, and self-corrections. These are related to self-monitoring processes in which speakers check their speech quality. In other words, this hypothesis entails the individuals who stutter and struggle with many planning problems within their internal speech which causes disfluencies in attempt to correct their errors. In general, monitoring accounts considers continuity between those who stutter and those who do not: disfluencies in both groups are caused by the same mechanisms, which emerge more frequently among those who stutter. The phonological deficiencies result in a lot of phonological speech errors internally which are identified and edited by the speaker’s self-monitor. In fact the disfluencies are

the product of editing phase (interrupting and restarting), and the kind of disfluency depends on the moment of interruption.(Robert.

Hartsuiker,Corley,Lickley,Russels,2003)

Looking from another perspective at the mechanism of emerging disfluency, it has been found out that as a speaker selects a word, other phonologically related and similar words like the intended word are activated. At first, the activation of all these words is similar, although when the activation is complete, the intended word gets to a higher asymptotic value at last. Kolk & Postma discuss that in case a response is made during the phase when activation is in process (rather than at full activation), the probability of competing rather than selecting the intended word increases which leads to error occurrence. They suggest that a speaker recognizes these errors by the use of the perceptual system in case they are produced overtly, and at this stage a monitor existing in the speaker's linguistic system responds by interrupting and starting correction. Thus, word repetition and hesitation (not actually errors in themselves) have been considered as indicators of underlying errors which are identified and interrupted before speech output comes up with overt errors.(Howell,2003) According to the editor theories of monitoring, there is a monitoring system in the speaker's cognitive which demands the existence of an editor to replace speech incorrect output through the production processes. It is likely that the editor itself contains a system of rules on its own which checks the output. (Komos,1999)

1.2 What is meant by hesitation?

Hesitations have been known as pauses with varying length, which are not usually left unfilled. They usually occur when a speaker is in lack of words or struggles with cognitive or perhaps verbal planning. Obviously, native speakers fill the hesitation fillers by various fillers including non-lexical fillers like lengthening or stretching sounds, quasi-lexical fillers, repeating one or several lexical items, and finally lexical fillers.(Rieger,2003)

1.3 Function of disfluencies and hesitation

Generally, pragmatic markers have been identified by Jackson(1969),Halliday(1970),Bron and Yule(1983),Redeker(1990), and Brinton(1996) to be functioning on two major levels: the textual/ideational and the interpersonal level. Basically, they monitor discourses in the textual level and function communicatively in the interpersonal level. In other words, textual monitors are basically focused on the text, where the speaker resorts to them in order to turn some fragmented pieces of discourse into a coherent text. In the social monitor function, they mainly negotiate the meaning and manage discourse in order to ensure building an effective communicative channel between the interlocutors.(Erman,2001)

Generally, pragmatic markers presuppose one speaker and at least one addressee involved in a speech situation, where they simultaneously create and monitor through discourse. Pragmatic markers carry a little or even no

meaning by themselves and can only be perceived either by clues in the context or situation, or through making a conventionalized pragmatic meaning being mapped onto them. It all implies that pragmatic markers mainly function to monitor discourse and conversation in different ways. (Erman,2001:p3)

Studies have shown that disfluencies have several different functions and motivations. Some of them, such as silent pauses, are produced to facilitate breathing, but at the same time enable the speaker to harmonise his/her speech processes, and allow listeners to comprehend and digest what they have heard. Other disfluency phenomena appear as "errors", which are almost distracting for the listener. Recently, a study on hesitations and disfluencies in speech, showed there is an instance of disfluency per six words in spontaneous speech although in longer monologues the frequency reaches to every 3.6 words(this count does not include silent pauses)(extra6) As discussed by Brighton(1996) hesitation discourse markers like "you know"," you see", and "sort of" have been known to be 'stylistically stigmatized and negatively considered specially in written or formal discourse' (Brinton, 1996:33). As a result, based on this idea, they are not expected to emerge in academic lectures. Similarly, Webber (2004) claims that "you know" and "I mean" are quite rare outside casual conversation. (Lin.2009 :p2)

On the other hand, Goldman-Eisler noted that words following hesitation have a low transitional probability and therefore they carry a high information value. It can be concluded that FPs may be useful for listeners by pre-signalling the upcoming important linguistic materials (Fox Tree, 1993.Shriberg and Stolcke.1996)

In fact, the researchers who have studied filled pauses from a discourse perspective, believe in the functional validity they contain.(Swerts ,1998)

1.4 Previous studies on hesitation

Hieke was one of the pioneers who discovered that non-native speakers use more self-repairs rather than native speakers. Wiese found out in his study focused on self-repair in L1 and L2 production that L1 and L2 production are different processes. Wiese also showed that L2 speakers employ larger number of self-repairs rather than L1 speakers. He discussed that L2 speakers' error in speech is more than L1 speakers', and L2 speakers tend to correct their errors more than L1 speakers do. He also proposed that L2 speakers require more time to plan their contributions due to the inadequate knowledge of their L2, and they show less automatization in processing their second language. However, Wiese & Hieke could not investigate the relationship between language proficiency and self-repair.

On the other hand, O'Connor studied the speech of beginning and advanced L2 learners and found out that beginners do not use more self-repairs than the advanced learners. However, they employ various kinds of self-repair such as producing more corrective repairs rather than anticipatory repairs (covert repairs) although advanced learners utilize more anticipatory self-repairs.

Temple focused on self-repair in the speech of L1 and beginner L2 users. She analysed speech and repair frequency in both groups and found out that native speakers seem to speak twice faster than non-native speakers do because of the frequent and skilful application of fillers. In contrast, the non-native speakers mostly leave their hesitation pauses unfilled, produce more false starts, and leave more errors uncorrected in comparison with the native speakers. (Rieger, 2003).

In a research, Brook (1992) studied a group of English students who had registered for a Spanish conversation course at a college and made a deep analysis on their performance. Brooks (1992) observed that the participants of his research were frequently resorting to their first language any time they were asked for further clarification on the meaning of some Spanish terms. The findings of the study showed it was enough to involve the students in communicative activities and tasks in class and then expect them to be successful in negotiation of meaning in real communicative contexts. In other words, students should be explicitly trained a series of strategies to employ whenever their knowledge of L2 does not suffice to build an efficient communication. (Kaivanpanah, 2012: p3)

1.5 Gender and Hesitation

Since 1970s, the interest in the way men and women talk has grown dramatically. There have been many sociolinguistic researches carried out to study this phenomenon across different cultures which means our discoveries about the patterns of talk among males and females is much more than the past. Initially, researchers focused on the core properties of language such as phonetics and phonology, syntax and morphology. Later, they turned their attention to wider perspectives of talk like conversational strategies in consideration of gender. According to Jennifer Coates, in her book of *Language and Gender: A reader* (1998) mentions these shifts in research focus have been accompanied by changes in theoretical perspective too. In the early 1960s and 1970s, studies on interaction of language and gender were basically relied on a predominantly necessary paradigm which classified speakers according to biological sex, and then applied quantitative methods. Later, in the 1970s and 1980s cultural construction of categories like gender was preferred to be studied more qualitatively, and ethnographic approaches predominated. Recently, a more dynamic social constructionist approach has emerged which combines both quantitative and qualitative researches. Further to the general investigations on communication strategies, there have also been a few studies examining the effect of gender on the frequency and kinds of CSs. (Coates, 1998: p3)

However, as Oxford and Nyikos (1988) noted, out of 80 papers, studies, and chapters in books at that time, only four studies focused on gender differences in using the strategies. Almost all of these studies have proved that females use more language learning strategies rather than the males. Furthermore, sociolinguistic evidence on gender difference in communication partially agrees with the differences identified in the use of CS by men and women. According to Oxford and Nyikos (1989) females

have been reported to use conversational input elicitation strategies relating to social interaction more frequently than males. (Gorjian, Pazhakh, Parang, 2012). Fishman (1983) carried out a study to find out the type of conversational strategies males and females employ to maintain power relationships. He recorded 52 hour talk between three couples at home. Based on the findings, it was shown that males and females differ in applying communication strategies. For instance, during talk, men attempted to dominate on the conversations. Contrarily, women tended to ask questions about three times more than the men, and interestingly, as Fishman (1983) argues "the questions were internationally powerful utterances". The answers were mostly meant to ensure maintaining the communication although for a short while. Moreover, it was discovered that even the initial purpose of using the same strategies across gender groups varied. For example, when a man used minimal responses like yeah, umm, and huh, he meant he was reluctant to keep on the interaction; in contrast, when a woman uttered minimal responses, she meant to be supporting ideas and conversation, and also implying that she was attentively participating in the conversation.

In another study, Kocoglu (1997) studied the type and frequency of communication strategies employed by male and females. To carry out this study, he selected Turkish EFL learners as the participants and analyzed their communication strategies during oral interaction with Native and Non-Native speakers. He found out that the gender differentiation with regard to the use of communication strategies across NS interlocutors was considerably impressive. The findings also showed that EFL learners used more CSs while they were interacting with female native speakers to sound like more cooperative and encouraging. Another important factor effective on the use of communication strategies was identified as personality. It has been shown in some studies that extrovert and talkative students have been more successful interlocutors in conversation rather than the introvert and shy ones.

In a recent study, Lai (2010), investigated the effect of gender on the use of CSs between 36 Chinese EFL learners, who were asked to participate in some oral and written communicative tasks. The subjects of the research were required to convey the meaning of two abstract and two concrete concepts to a native speaker. They were asked to explain the concepts for a native speaker till he/she could grasp the target word correctly. The findings of the study proposed that males and females did not vary very much in regard to the use of CSs which was attributed to the learning environment. However, it was discovered that females used CSs more effectively than the males and ran the execution stage of the production more efficiently. (Kaivanpanah et al, 2012: p5)

Recently, the correlation between structure, language use, and the social roles of the males and females has been a popular topic among most of the sociolinguists. Generally, all recognized societies accept and mark gender differences in speech. (Baron 1986 in Wardhaugh 1993, Lakoff 1990, Mulac 1989, Tannen 1990).

Similarly, Lakoff (1973), claims that there are some special words like colour words such as *beige*, *lavender* and also some adjectives like *adorable*, *charming* which

are mostly used by females rather than the male. In addition, studies have shown that women have their own vocabulary which is more evident while describing their special feeling and ideas by the use of words and expressions such as *so good, such, lovely, etc.* (Wardhaugh 1993).

Carli (1990) has also suggested in a study that men and women have different norms affecting speech style perceptions. For instance, low-status people, including women, are basically known by a type of powerless speech style which generally appeals to intensifiers like *so, very, and hedges* like *I think, kind of, hesitations (uh, well), etc.* as linguistic means to obtain their social position (Erickson, Lind, Johnson, and O'Barr 1978). Interestingly, findings have shown that females tend to use intensifiers quite frequently, but in contrast men prefer to use hedges in speech rather than the intensifiers. (Carli 1990). Linguistically, females have been shown to be more polite than males. (Ghafar Samar & Alibakhshi, 2007:p2)

According to Milroy (1997), we cannot deny the difficulty of explaining the linguistic sex-marking based on the general orientation of current sociolinguistics quite convincingly.

In another investigation, Mulac & Bradac (1995) discussed that the relationship between gender, language and power is too complex to be simply understood. However, Labov (1966) and Trudgill (1972) have emphasized a stronger role for community prestige norms as the main driving force in women's linguistic behaviour, as opposed to men's. Trudgill's study in Norwich led him to the finding that women are overwhelmingly conservative, although they showed as if it is men who lead the directions in most changes. (Ghafar Samar & Alibakhshi, 2007:p3)

Similarly, Erickson, Lind, Johnson, and O'Barr (1978) investigated on "powerful speech style" and "powerless speech style" and proposed that speech style is related to social power and status. Low-status people mostly use hesitation forms ("uh," "well"), hypercorrect grammar, use questioning forms (rising intonation in declarative form for questioning), polite forms, and gestures, although the high-status individuals seldom use these powerless styles. (Ghafar Samar & Alibakhshi, 2007:p3)

2. Materials & Methods

2.1 Participants

Unfortunately, the communicative aspect of teaching English has been excluded from the curriculum of high schools and even most universities in Iran which leads to the graduates' English communication inefficiencies. (Izadi, & Atasheneh, 2012), so the researcher focused the study on the population of Iranian students in Malaysia. In order to investigate which pragmatic markers Iranian EFL learners use during hesitation, the researcher selected the population of TEP (Tertiary English Program) students in a public university in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, who had already taken the IELTS and received a score of 5.5. Thus, the language competence of the population was almost the same, but their language

background needed to be checked for a higher congruency scale. The instrumentation which was used at this stage was a LBQ (language background questionnaire) questionnaire, which helped the researcher to identify the most congruent participants regarding their language background.

Finally, respondents included six males and six females whose dominant language was their first language, Persian, and had not grown up as a bilingual, but learned L2 initially at school, and then continued in language institutes or private classes in their home country.

Each participant had to take part in an oral L2 test consisting of 4 parts: Introduction, Conversation (General) Questions, Retelling a passage, and Picture description for 10-12 minutes.

The collected data yielded about 140 minutes of English interaction between the student as the subject and the researcher as the interviewer.

2.2 Research Instrument

The research instruments which were used in this study included a Language Background Questionnaire to find the most congruent subjects regarding their language background, twelve unseen passages to give them to read and retell after a limited time, twelve unseen pictures to show them randomly for a description based on their imagination, and finally 3 sets of general questions extracted from the assessment database of a language institute with their permission.

2.3 Data Collection and the procedure of the present study

In collecting the data, the researcher recorded the sessions and afterwards tried to transcribe the recording of the interview session including all the pauses and incoherent sounds the respondents produced, and it was checked for several times in order not to skip even a short silent pause. Then she identified the hesitation strategies used and coded them as drawling, pauses, repeating words, using hesitation filler words and producing incoherent vocals. Not all pragmatic markers like "I think" indicated hesitation strategy, so the researcher had to ensure that they were playing hesitation function in the utterances.

2.4 Method

The sessions were digitally recorded. Based on the findings of the pilot study to contribute to the reliability of the results, the participants were required to read the passages, given by the researcher, in a timely manner of only one minute to get a gist of as much as they could read, for the third section of their interview. The subject of the passages varied, so that the general idea of the texts could not be passed and shared among the participants. The topics centered on social, historical, and environmental issues.

Each session began with some explanations about the format of the test by the researcher, and proceeded with

conversation questions as the second part, retelling a passage was the third part, and finally describing a picture was the fourth part of the test.

3. Result

As this study carried out to identify the gender differences in the use of hesitation strategies during oral L2 test, all emerging discourse markers of hesitation were investigated with respect to the independent variable of gender. The results of the frequency counts on the

transcribed data are summarized in the following data tables and graph.

The results show that male group had the highest rate of hesitation in reply to General Questions, and with a slight difference of 11, retelling a passage was discovered as the second most challenging context for this gender group. However, the occurrence rate of producing hesitation markers suddenly fell from 106 to 82 for the Picture description part, and it finally sank to the lowest with the frequency of 36 in Introduction part.

Table 1. Hesitation discourse markers used by males

HS(m)	Intro	GQ	Pa	Pi
HFW	0	13	7	12
RW	0	6	6	5
HFV	24	71	67	40
PAUSE	6	7	11	12
Dr	6	20	15	13
Total	36	117	106	82

Table 2. Hesitation discourse markers used by females

HS(f)	Intro	GQ	Pa	Pi
HFW	0	3	5	11
RW	0	7	9	6
HFV	23	77	4	16
Pause	2	8	8	15
Dr	1	16	10	10
Total	26	111	36	58

On the other hand, the findings show that the female participants produced the most hesitation discourse markers in the General Question section with the frequency rate of 116 times, and this number decreased to only 58 times in the Picture Description section which still holds the second most challenging part of oral task for females. The next two sections came up with the

frequency of 36 and 26 for the Passage and Introduction parts respectively. For a clear comparative view on the type and frequency of hesitation strategies in the present study you can notice figure.1 as following.

The analysis proceeded to discover the frequency of each single hesitation discourse marker in regard with gender group. The result is summarized as following:

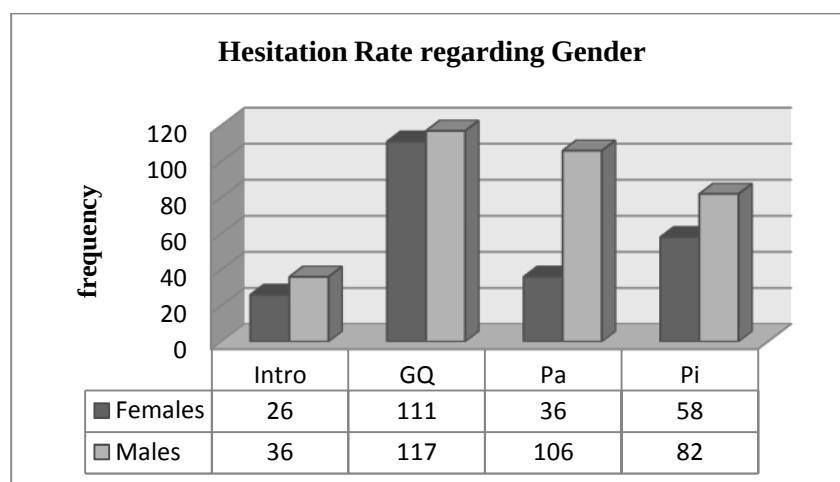


Figure 1. Hesitation strategies used by both genders

Table 3. Frequency of hesitation discourse markers used by both genders

	HFW	RW	HFV	Pause	Drawling
Females	19	22	120	33	37
Males	32	17	202	36	54

Table 4. Frequency of hesitation filler vocals produced by both genders

vocals	EEM	UUM	MMM	EEE	UUH
females	7	7	16	88	2
males	4	0	20	135	43

As the above data table represents, male groups hesitated more and produced larger number of hesitation discourse markers rather than the females. It was discovered that the males uttered HFV twice more than the females. According to the findings, the male group produced incoherent vocals while hesitating for 202 times whereas females produced these markers for 120 times. However, the hesitation pattern of both groups showed quite similar results. The most frequent hesitation marker in both gender groups was found out as HFV, with the frequency of 202 for males, and 120 for females, and the second most frequently employed strategy for both gender group was discovered as drawling although the results show that women drawled for 37 times and males drawled for 54 times. As the third mostly used hesitation strategy for both gender groups, we can notice pausing with the frequency of 33 for females and 36 for males. Interestingly, the fourth mostly employed strategy among the females is discovered as Repeating Words with the total frequency of 22 and in contrast it is identified as HFW among the males with the frequency of 32, and finally the least popular discourse marker of hesitation among the females was found out as HFW with the frequency of 19, and Repeating words among the male group with the rate of 17.

For a detailed analysis, the transcribed data was studied to investigate the frequency of each single incoherent vocals produced during hesitation across the genders.

As the tables above show, females produced “eee” quite more frequently than the rest of the vocals with the rate of 88, and the second mostly uttered vocal was proved to be “mmm” with the frequency of 16 which shows a sharp decline from the first group. Then “uum” and “eem” seem to be produced as often as 7 times, and the least commonly used vocal is discovered as “uuh” with twice occurrence in the whole transcription among the females.

On the other hand, the total frequency rate of “eee” among males is found out as 135 times which is highly more than female group. However, the second mostly used vocal during hesitation is identified as “uuh” with the frequency of 43, and the third mostly uttered sound is “eem” with a considerable decrease in comparison with the previous one, summed as 4 times occurrence all through the transcription among males. Interestingly, no males tended to use “uum” during hesitation in L2 oral speech.

4. Discussion & Conclusion

The findings of this study propose a relation between gender and language particularly in the application of hesitation discourse markers. This small scale research suggests a more complex picture of gender differentiation in regard with the application of fillers. A first exploration was concentrated on the type of hesitation strategies used by both gender groups, and then the four

different parts of the oral test were analyzed to discover the most challenging oral tasks across gender, and finally the frequency of each hesitation marker was investigated to identify the most common strategy used by males and females during a L2 oral test.

Overall, the results support a portrait of males with a bigger hesitation rate than females. It is proved here that both males and females hesitate most often in reply to general questions. However, the findings of the present study showed that females hesitated more while they were describing a picture rather than the males who produced more hesitation markers when they were asked to explain about what they had read. However, speaking about a picture seems to be less challenging than speaking about a passage for men, but in contrast, females seem to hesitate more frequently while speaking about a picture rather than a passage. Interestingly, both gender groups didn't show a big frequency rate of hesitation for the introduction part.

Concerning the type of hesitation strategies, the findings implied that both gender groups employed the same hesitation strategies during oral L2 speech, but they only varied in respect to the frequency of each. Based on the findings, males prefer to use hesitation filler words more than repeating words, but in contrary, females proved to be using hesitation filler words as the least popular hesitation strategy.

On the other hand, the analysis on the vocals suggests that "uum" seems to be a feminine vocal as it was not used by any of the male participants, although "uuh" was discovered as a masculine vocal among the Iranian EFL learners of the study which was only produced twice during the whole oral speech of the females.

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