How Do Beginners of English Develop Their Oral Interaction Skills?
From A Sociolinguistic Point of View

Junko Negishi
(Waseda University)

Cohen (1996) cited that target language learners might tend to respond in accordance with the learner's native language and culture and find that the utterances are not at all appropriate for the target language and cultural situation.   By using the data spoken by junior high school students, apologies, refusals, compliments and requests are investigated according to Cohen (1996).

The students are divided into two groups: more proficient students and less proficient students.   Both of the groups are given a topic to discuss for five minutes.   Some sociolinguistic utterances are observed, such as the less proficient students' apologies for communication breakdowns and the excessive amount of compliments used by the more proficient students.   The characteristics that both levels of students have in common are the tendency to demand directly or use *please* for requests, and the use of mitigation when stating an objection.

1.0   Introduction

Boards of education in Japan have led various attempts to develop students' practical communicative competence, such as the introduction of English to some elementary schools and the foundation of "Super English High Schools": *The Japan Times* (2002).

Due to the shift in emphasis of the Course of Study in Japan in 1988 and 1998, boards of education and junior high schools are seeking better means to improve students' communicative competence.   A concrete example of this effort is an "Interactive English Forum", which has been conducted since 1999 by the Ibaraki Prefectural Board of Education.   The "Speech Contest," held annually up until 1998, was discontinued since memorizing and reciting a speech is only one-way communication.   In its place, this pioneering approach aiming at the students' oral interactions was put into practice.   The prefecture has also been shifting its high school entrance examinations of English from more grammatical-based to more practical-based ones.   One of the purposes of the Forum is "to develop students' communicative competence placing emphasis on interaction in English as an international language": Ibaraki Prefectural Board of Education (1999).

The students participating in the Forum are divided into groups consisting of three members, or four in rare cases; the number of participants is determined by random selection.   A few minutes prior to the interaction, the students are given a topic that will be discussed for five minutes in front of a panel of judges.   Prior to the free conversation in the group, each student is given 30 seconds of self-introduction to avoid taking too much time for introductions in the

conversation.   Only three topics - "family", "friends," and "school" - are used at the County and City Forums, as well as at the first round of District Forums; hence, students are able to practice what to talk about in advance, to some extent.   Nonetheless, students are required to maintain interaction with others at the Forum, so if a student changes the topic suddenly because of prior practice, the judges are to deduct some points.   Topics for the second round at the District Forums and all rounds of the Prefecture Forums are chosen from the words in the students' junior high school English textbooks such as "useful," "holiday," and so forth.   This requires students to carry out more realistic conversations than students at the lower level are able to do.

The purpose of the study is to evaluate the students' oral interaction skills in terms of sociolinguistic competence.   The following section discusses the background of this research.

2.0   Background

"Speaking is in many ways an undervalued skill: literary skills are on the whole more prized": Bygate (1987: ii).   Learners need to be able not only to write, but also to speak with confidence in English as a foreign language (EFL) in order to carry out smooth verbal interactions. It is especially crucial to start to learn communication skills as soon as one begins learning English, that is, at junior high schools, since that is the age at which students begin learning EFL in Japan. Davies (1978) mentioned that a communicative approach should focus on oral skills before written ones.   Putting too much stress on grammar in junior high and high schools might have caused the deficiency in communication ability, specifically oral interaction skills, among Japanese learners.

Since Chomsky's (1965) distinction between competence and performance in terms of linguistic knowledge and Hymes' first use of the term communicative competence (Hymes 1972), various definitions have been given.   Among the vast research, Canale and Swain (1980a, 1980b), Canale (1983), and Swain (1984) brought various expanded notions of communicative competence, which subsequently contributed to the Course of Study in Japan.   In the view of Canale and Swain, communicative competence minimally involves four areas of knowledge and skills: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence.

Hymes (1972) contributed the notion of sociolinguistic appropriateness, distinguishing between what is possible, what is feasible, what is appropriate, and what is actually done in the use of communicative language.   Sociolinguistic competence, according to Swain, "addresses the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts, depending on contextual factors such as topic, status of participants, and purposes of the interactions.   Appropriateness of utterances refers to both appropriateness of meaning and appropriateness of form": Swain (1984: 188).

Cohen (2003) lists six speech acts that require appropriateness: apologies, complaints, compliments, refusals, requests, and thanking.   In terms of apology, Cohen (2003) lists five kinds of apologies: 1) expression of an apology (e.g. containing a verb "sorry," "excuse," et cetera), 2)

acknowledgement of responsibility (e.g. "It's my fault."), 3) explanation or account (e.g. "The bus was late."), 4) offer of repair, and 5) promise of non-recurrence.   Linnell et al. (1992) found no significant difference between the native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) in apology utterances in six of the eight situations of verbal discourse completion situations.   Fukushima and Iwata (1987) observed that there was no significant difference between the NS and the NNS in the sequence of semantic formulas in request utterances, which was generally similar in Japanese and English.   EFL learners' proficiency does not seem to affect sociolinguistic competence.

On the other hand, Cohen cited his own work with Olshatain and Rosenstein (1986) that the NNS lack sensitivity to certain sociolinguistic distinctions that native speakers make, such as the distinction between forms for realizing the semantic formula of expressing an apology, for example, *excuse me* and *sorry.*   Cohen (1996) concluded that target language learners might tend to respond in accordance with the learner's native language and culture and find that the utterances are not at all appropriate for the target language and cultural situation.   Because junior high school students have not acquired enough social convention, even in their first language, there would be considerable difficulty in determining the most appropriate way to make utterances in particular situations. Nevertheless, apologies, refusals, compliments and requests are investigated according to Cohen (1996).

3.0   Purpose of the Study

There may be numerous ways to evaluate the speakers' oral interactions.   Among the vast areas of research, the notion of communicative competence by Canale and Swain is employed here because of the fact that the Course of Study of Japan appears to be guided by their theory.   Among the four areas of communicative competence, the participants' conversation data are analyzed from sociolinguistic point of view to determine the items that discriminate not only between the more proficient students and the less proficient students, but also between the students and the native speakers.   After obtaining its results, pedagogical implications are considered for the purpose of developing their sociolinguistic competence.

4.0   Method
4.1   Participants

There are three types of participants.   The first group consists of the students taking part in the District Forum (middle level Forum), but not proceeding to the Prefecture Forum (the highest level Forum).   The group is given the name "middle level students" (MLS).   Among the participants, twelve MLS are extracted from the District Forum, four of which are male and eight of which are female.   The MLS are further divided into four subgroups.

The second group consists of the students taking part in the Prefecture Forum, the final level for the prefecture, and is given the name "higher level students (HLS)."   Among thirty-six

HLS from the Prefecture Forum, twelve students, five males and seven females, are extracted who participated in the third round or higher.   The HLS are also divided into four subgroups.

The data of the twelve native speakers (NS) that constitute the last group are used as the baseline data to compare with the students' conversation data.   The vocation of the NS participants is to help students who are studying English as a foreign language accomplish their learning goals to a certain degree.   Currently, nine of them are teaching English to junior high school students in Ibaraki prefecture as assistant language teachers (ALTs).   The NS's teaching experience is from six months to five and a half years.   Many of them are married and do not have much opportunity to speak Japanese; however, they understand and speak Japanese to some extent.   The remaining three participants are teaching English to adults at an English school in Toronto, Canada.   They do not understand any Japanese.   Out of the twelve NS selected for the study, seven are male and five are female.   The NS are further divided into four subgroups as well.

4.2   Conversation Data

The conversations were videotaped and recorded.   For all the interactions, not only was the audio data transcribed, but also the non-verbal expressions, such as head nods and laughter/smiles, were recorded.   The transcription convention mainly follows Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998).
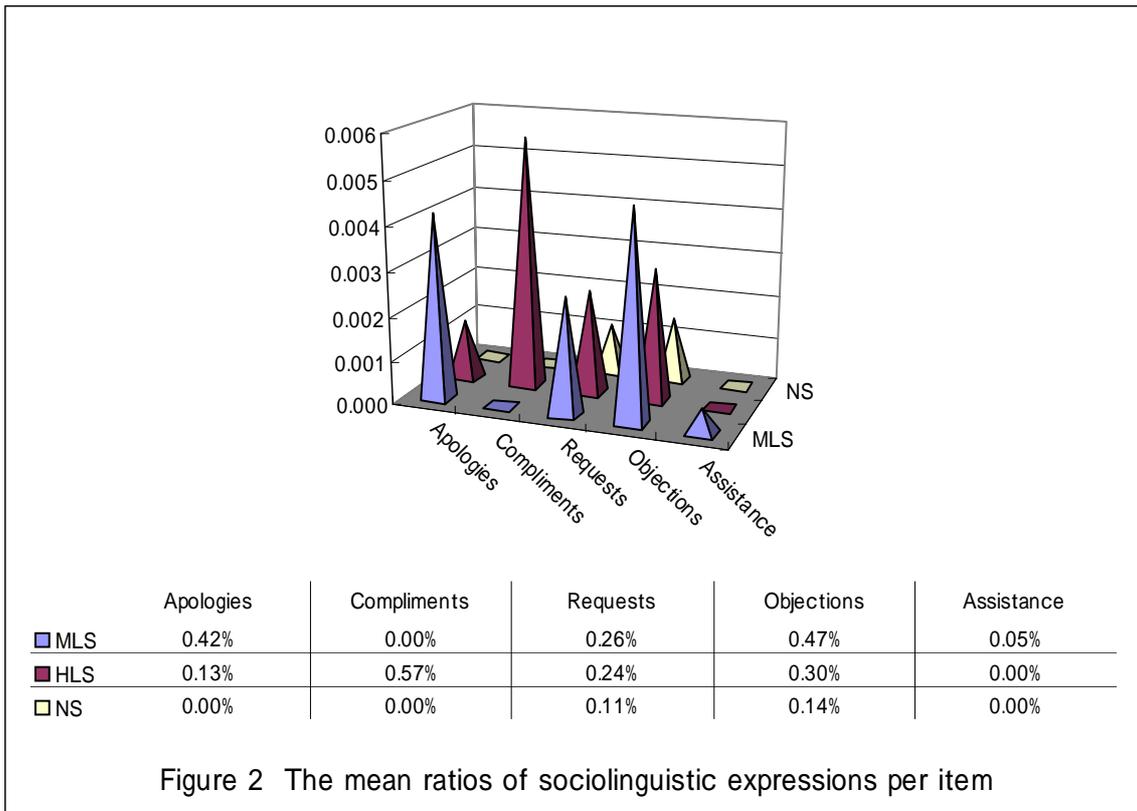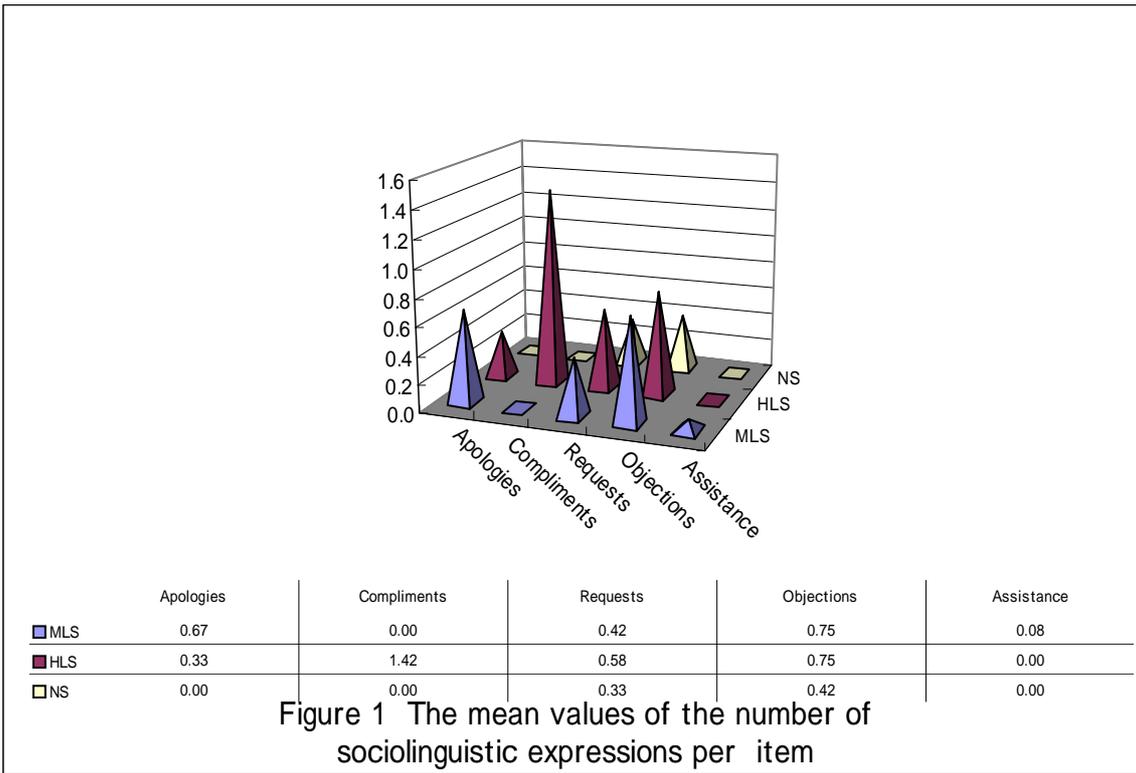
4.3   Categories of Data Analysis

Based on the nature of the topics given to the participants (the given topic), such as culture, school, friends and so forth, it appears to be very difficult to find expressions displaying social skills; nonetheless, the following items are counted in this study according to Cohen's (1996) terminology: apologies, compliments, requests, objections, refusals, rejections and complaints. Because of limited number of the expressions, the analysis is mainly qualitative.

5.0.   Results and Discussion

In this section, the participants' sociolinguistic competence is analyzed by investigating how the participants apologize, compliment, request, object, and verbally co-operate with each other. Since the oral interactions follow a given topic, not very many instances of expressing sociolinguistic competence are observed.   To inquire further into sociolinguistic competence, planned settings, such as discourse completion tests, should be conducted.

5.1   Quantitative Analysis

Figure 1 illustrates the number of expressions uttered by the participants that show sociolinguistic competence.   With respect to apologies, the MLS utter the most at 0.67 times and the HLS utter apologies at 0.33 times, whereas the NS do not utter any apologies.   As for compliments, the HLS give compliments 1.42 times, whereas the MLS and the NS do not

	Apologies	Compliments	Requests	Objections	Assistance
☐ MLS	0.67	0.00	0.42	0.75	0.08
☐ HLS	0.33	1.42	0.58	0.75	0.00
☐ NS	0.00	0.00	0.33	0.42	0.00

Figure 1 The mean values of the number of
sociolinguistic expressions per item

	Apologies	Compliments	Requests	Objections	Assistance
☐ MLS	0.42%	0.00%	0.26%	0.47%	0.05%
☐ HLS	0.13%	0.57%	0.24%	0.30%	0.00%
☐ NS	0.00%	0.00%	0.11%	0.14%	0.00%

Figure 2 The mean ratios of sociolinguistic expressions per item

compliment other speakers at all in the five-minute interactions.　All the groups use expressions of

request: the highest number is by the HLS, 0.58, the second highest by the MLS, 0.42, and the lowest by the NS, 0.33.   The MLS and HLS object the same number of times: 0.75 times; whereas the NS object 0.42 times.   There is only one example of assistance and no instances of refusals, rejections, or complaints in the interactions; therefore, the present study does not refer to refusals, rejections or complaints.

Figure 2 illustrates the proportion of expressions in the conversations that show sociolinguistic competence.   Within the MLS group, objections are employed the most at 0.47%, the second is apologies, and the third is requests.   The HLS employ compliments the most at 0.57%; objections and requests follow. The NS employ objections and requests at the low rates of 0.14% and 0.11% respectively, and there are no instances of apology, compliment, or assistance among the NS.

Because of the low number of the individual types of sociolinguistic expressions, the sum total of all sociolinguistic expressions for each of the three groups is shown in Figure 3. The results show that the HLS tend to employ sociolinguistic expressions the most, followed by the MLS, and then the NS who employ them the least. Nonetheless, the ratios of total sociolinguistic expressions for each group - the total number of sociolinguistic expressions per total number of words for each group – show that there is not a significant difference between the MLS and the HLS, as Figure 4 illustrates.

Figure 3 The sum total of all sociolinguistic expressions per group

Figure 4 The mean ratios of the total number of sociolinguistic expressions per group
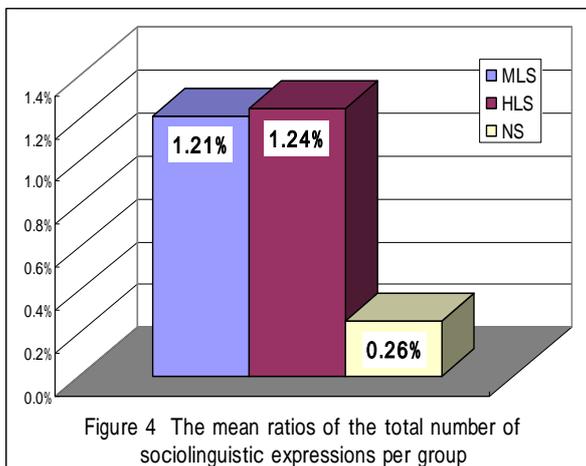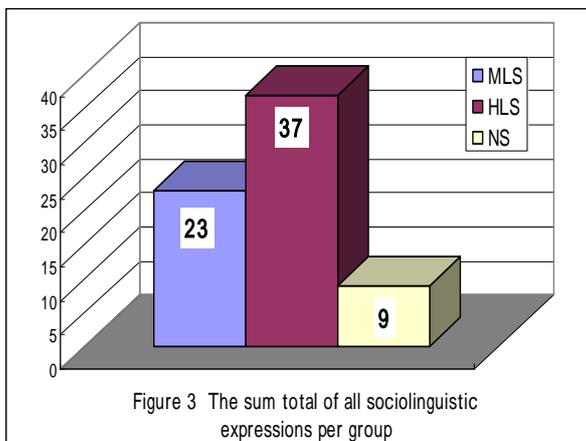
5.2   Qualitative analysis

Although there are a limited number of expressions showing sociolinguistic competence, some patterns and characteristics can be inferred from the data.   As mentioned above, the NS do not express any apologies, whereas the students use "I'm sorry" to apologize for breakdowns in the conversations.   Following is an example from the MLS (see underlines):

Excerpt (1) (MLS: Group A, lines 86-88,   Group A, lines 93-95)

86 B: Ah! ...   Mmm...... Er? (puzzled)   <u>I'm sorry</u>.

87 A: <u>I'm sorry</u>.   Harry Potter.

88 B: <u>I'm sorry</u>.

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93 C: It's difficult. ((B:laugh))

94 A: <u>I'm ... I'm sorry</u>. ((nod)) Do you like music?

95 B: Yes. ((nod))

From lines 86 to 88, the MLS interact almost exclusively with "I'm sorry."   Realizing the conversation is breaking down, the students apologize to each other to try and restore the conversation.   Also, in lines 93 to 95, another breakdown occurs and Speaker A tries to resolve the problem by changing the topic after apologizing.

In contrast, the HLS have an expanded range of expressions (see underlines):

Excerpt (2) (HLS: Group B, lines 71-72,   Group B, lines 107-109)

71 C: Cold? ((nod))   Why don't you like cold?

72 A: Mmm... Ahaha.   <u>I'm sorry I can't explain</u>. ((nod))

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107 B: Mmm which do you think, mm, oh, <u>sorry</u>, mm, <u>I can't say</u>.

108 A: Oh...((nod))

109 C: <u>That's O.K</u>.   Eh,heh.   <u>I understand</u>. ((A:nod)) ((nod))

At line 72, Speaker A expresses the reason for using an apology by adding "I can't explain."   This excerpt demonstrates a difference between the MLS and the HLS in dealing with possible breakdowns in conversation.   Furthermore, from lines 107 to 109, Speaker C responds to the apology uttered by Speaker B with the expression "That's OK. … I understand" (see double underlines).

According to Cohen (2003), there are five sequential types of apologies: a) expression of an apology, b) acknowledgement of responsibility, c) explanation or account, d) offer of repair, e) promise of non-recurrence.   Based on this, it appears that the MLS only use a) expression of apology, whereas the HLS employ both a) and c), expression of apology and explanation or account. The difference in the number of apologies between the MLS and the HLS, eight times and four times respectively, is due to the difference in the number of breakdowns, which is five times for the MLS and two times for the HLS.   As expected, among the NS, communication breakdowns do not occur resulting in a smooth flow in the interactions.

With respect to compliments, neither the MLS nor the NS praise the other speakers.   It is possible that the reason the MLS do not compliment the other interlocutors is that the MLS have a lack of expressions with which to offer compliments.   The reason the NS do not offer compliments may be that the group members are familiar with each other and the situation does not lend itself to compliments.   The HLS are capable of complimenting other group members (see underlines) and, also, responding to compliments (see double underlines).   See Excerpt (3):

Excerpt (3) (HLS: Group B, lines 126-127, Group D, lines 122-127)

126 B: But you are good at English very well. ((nod)) ((C:nod))
127 A: Oh, thank you. ((nod))

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122 B: Heh, heh... You're good.
123 A: Don't.
124 B: Sorry.   So good.
125 A: No.
126 B: You look good.
127 A: I want to be, I want to will be ((C:nod)) your, your style.

At line 126, Speaker B praises Speaker A, and A replies, "Oh, thank you."   This interaction constructs an adjacency pair, with an appropriate response.   From lines 122 to 127, speakers A and B try, hesitantly, to compliment each other.   The English level of these students is by no means high, but the students are able to convey compliments to other members.

Regarding requests, the MLS and the HLS have common, as well as differing characteristics:

Excerpt (4) (MLS: Group A, lines 10-14,   HLS: Group B, lines 59-62)

10 B: …belong to track and field club. ((A:nod))
11 C: What is it?
12 B: Ah.. Track and field club?
13 C: Yeah. ((nod))
14 B: Uh... running.

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59 A: Do you like cold, cold place? ((nod))
60 C: Ah... cold place? ((nod)) What?
61 A: Cold place.
62 C: Yeah, I like cold place.   But…

One of the characteristics that the MLS and the HLS have in common is the method of requesting an answer as is seen in Excerpt (4). They employ direct questions at lines 11 and 60, which are uttered with rather strong intonation (see underlines). It appears to be difficult for both groups of students to use polite questions, such as, "Could/Would you explain …?" or "Do you mean…?" Another common characteristic between the MLS and the HLS is that they often use the word, *please,* when asking for something from another speaker, as is shown in Excerpt (5) (see underlines)

Excerpt (5) (MLS: Group B, line 73,   HLS: Group A, line 28)
    73A: Please tell me about your best friend.
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    28 C: Please give me something when you come home.

Nakano et al. (2000, 2003) say that Japanese learners overuse the pattern "imperative + *please"*, which is a common structure in the students' textbooks. It appears that, although Nakano's finding was obtained from university students, the overuse of the pattern is caused by the excessive use of the pattern in junior high school English classes and textbooks.   The participants in the present study learn the pattern "imperative + *please*" at an early stage of English study: the first semester of the first grade in junior high school.   To avoid this pattern, it might be better not to teach the "imperative + *please"* pattern together with the study of imperatives in classroom settings, and to teach request expressions instead.

A different characteristic of the HLS compared to the MLS, however, is that there are some speakers, though not many, who are able to use more polite interrogatives, as is shown below in Excerpt (6) (see underline):

Excerpt (6) (HLS: Group D, line 10)
    10 A: Umm...   Would you say that again, please?

With respect to objections, a slight difference can be seen between the MLS and the HLS. Basically, the MLS employ simple questions and answers, such as, "Do you …?" and "No."   The problem with the MLS is that they do not use the question-answer pairs to expand their conversations.   See below as an example (the questions are underlined in single line and the objections are underlined in double line).

Excerpt (7) (MLS: Group A, lines 69-79)
    69 C: And, do you like comic books?
    70 B: Yes, I like umm...(   ).

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71 C: Yes, me, too.

72 A: I don't know.   I like novels, especially mystery.   For example, Sherlock

73   Holmes, Agatha Cristy. ((B:nod))   Do you like them?

74 B: Mmm...   I like it, .. but ...   I don't read ... for it.   I always don't read it.

75   ((A,C:nod))

76 C: I have never read it, read, yeah. ((A:nod))   Do you like something?

77 A: Eh?

78 C: Comic books.

79 A: Yes, yes.   Um.. I like .. Harry Potter.

In response to Speaker C's question at line 69, B answers naturally at line 70; however, Speaker A self-asserts a personal interest, that is, novels, in lines 72 and 73.   Speaker A might not know much about the current topic and, thus, is unable to contribute to the interaction.   Speaker C tries to bring the conversation back to the topic about comics at lines 76 and 78, but Speaker A gives Speaker C an irrelevant answer.   This kind of breakdown (wiggly underline) occurs more often in the MLS's interactions compared to the HLS's interactions.

The common feature in the objections by the MLS and the HLS is mitigation (wiggly underlines in the excerpt below).   Both levels of the students try not to offend other speakers when conveying objections (double lines), although the HLS use more mitigation than the MLS:

Excerpt (8) (MLS: Group D, lines 101-107, HLS: Group C, lines 45-53)

101 B: Mmm, very much.   Do you like gossip?

102 A: Mmm, eheh,heh, yes. ((nod))

103 B: Oh.

104 C: I don't like... ((shake head))

105 B: Ehh?   Really?

106 C: Yeah.   Mmm I can't hear the another (   ).   ((A:nod)) Mmm, but I like

107   free talking.

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45 B: I eat the most in my class. ((A:nod))   I'm getting fat, [but I don't want to be

46 C: [Oh!

47 A: [Hhh.. ((nod))

48 B: a pig.

49 C: But you are thin.

50 B: No, no, no, no.   [I'm big, big, big, big.

51 C: [Ahahaha.=

52 A: = Ahahahaha. ((nod))

53 C: Big?   <u>Oh, I don't think so</u>.= ((shake head))

In the MLS's conversation, Speaker B asks a question at line 101, and Speaker C objects at line 104; however, in lines 106 and 107 C says, "…but I like free talking," mitigating the previous utterance.   In the HLS's interaction, Speaker B spoke with self humility and Speaker C discreetly objects to B's self-conception in order that Speaker B might save face.   The NS's objection is indirect with some hesitation as is shown in Excerpt (9) from lines 56 to 59 (see wiggly underlines).

Excerpt (9) (NS: Group D, lines 54-59)

54 B: The south is a lot more familiar.

55 A: Oh, yeah?

56 C: You know that it's supposed to be famous and I'd say [<u>Texas isn't really</u>

57 B: [<u>Texas isn't. It's not part of</u>

58 C: (＿＿＿＿＿) <u>a part of south</u>.

59 B: <u>the south</u>.   ((shake head))

In this interaction, Speaker A, a Canadian, started to talk about Texas.   Speakers B and C, both Americans, realize A's misconception about Texas and tried to correct A's misconception, unintentionally at the same time.

The only example of assistance among all of the groups occurs when an MLS cannot find a suitable word.   Another member of the group suggests the word, "Good?" and then first MLS responds with, "Good!" (MLS: Group 2)

6.0   Conclusion

Taking the NS's less sociolinguistic expressions into consideration, specifically in this situation, the students need to reduce their use of these expressions which are not necessary in normal communication.   Nonetheless, certain characteristics are found, such as the MLS's apologies for communication breakdowns and the excessive amount of compliments used by the HLS.   The qualitative difference that is observed between the MLS and the HLS is that the MLS apologize only with "I'm sorry."   Alternatively, the HLS are able to provide the reason for the apology and can also respond to the apology.   The characteristics that both levels of students have in common are the tendency to demand directly or use *please* for requests, and the use of mitigation when stating an objection.   It is necessary for the students to expand their variety of expressions to avoid breakdowns.   Firstly, for the less proficient students, adding one word or short phrase in certain situations is important, such as "I can't explain," "That's OK," or "Would you…?"   Then, assigning tasks that require a set of activities related problem solving or task-based instructions rather than pattern practice, which is currently a major teaching method in classrooms, would be

beneficial.

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