Agreement Strategies Among Malaysian Chinese Speakers of English

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to discover the agreement strategies adopted by Malaysian Chinese speakers of English in an academic discussion. Using Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Principle and Speech Acts as frameworks, it seeks to find out the reasons governing their choice of agreement strategies. Student discussions were recorded, transcribed and analysed. Review sessions were also carried out to gain insight into the speakers' choice of strategies. Analysis of the data revealed five agreement strategies employed by the students during a discussion. During the discussions, the students expressed the speech act of agreement, which support the hearer's positive face, by directly agreeing with the previous speaker, building upon the previous speaker's turn, completing and repeating part of the previous speaker's utterance and giving positive feedback. Of all the strategies, the most often employed and is sustained throughout the discussions is positive feedback. This is followed by building upon utterances, completion of the previous speaker's utterance and direct agreement. Apart from the Chinese cultural values which may influence the group's agreement strategies, the findings also reveal that gender has an influence in the participants' choice of agreement strategies since four out of the five strategies are mainly employed by the female participants. In sum, Malaysian Chinese speakers of English have their own communicative style when expressing agreement acts which is influenced by their cultural values and gender.

Keywords: agreement strategies; Chinese cultural values; speech act; politeness principles; gender

INTRODUCTION

It is claimed that around 400 million of the world's population speak English as their mother tongue, another 400 million as their second language and about 700 million speak it as a foreign language (Crystal 2006, in Hogg & Denison 2006, p.424). The number has surely increased in the last 10 years.

English may be an international language in the sense that it is used as a means of global communication between different nations. On the surface, the English spoken by these nations seem similar enough in their grammars to allow for mutual intelligibility. These speakers of Englishes may have grasped the grammatical, phonological and lexical aspect of the English language. However, each variety of English has taken on the characteristics of the local cultures they are embedded in. Thus, the way of speaking by one group of English speakers in one country is different from another. Aspects of language such as appropriate topics of conversation, turn-taking, forms of address and expressions of speech acts (giving compliments, making requests, invitations, refusals, agreement and disagreement) differ across cultural groups. They operate based on speakers' cultural assumptions on what they deem appropriate language behaviour. Speakers are often not aware of these assumptions since they operate below the surface but it is this awareness which is crucial, particularly in intercultural communication. Differing cultural assumptions or values could lead to intercultural miscommunication.

In view of the above premise, the aim of this research paper is to examine the pragmatic conventions of Malaysian Chinese speakers of English in performing the speech acts of agreement in an academic discussion and the reasons underlying them. Employing Speech Acts as a framework, these strategies will then be explained in light of Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Principle (PP).

RATIONALE FOR THIS RESEARCH

A number of studies have shown the communicative styles of English speakers from different cultural and language background may vary (Wierzbicka 1991, Valentine 1995, K.Sridhar 1991, Jamaliah Mohd Ali 1995 & 2000, Kitao 1989, Boonjeera Chiravate 2011, Rui Li et. al. 2015). Although these speakers may speak the same language, they often adopt pragmatics, socio-cultural conventions or discourse patterns from their first language when interacting with other speakers of English.

In sociolinguistics, this phenomenon is termed 'sociolinguistic transfer' (Chick 1996, p.332). It occurs when one uses "…the rules of speaking of one's own speech community or cultural group when interacting with members of another community or group". This can occur in interactions between a native speaker with a nonnative speaker (Wierzbicka 1996, Suwako Watanabe 1995, Rong Chen 1993, Abdul Aziz Idris 1991, Kitao 1989), a nonnative with a nonnative speaker (Jamaliah Mohd Ali 1995) or even among native speakers from different speech communities or cultural background such as between an American English speaker and an Australian English speaker (Renwick 1980).

Wierzbicka (1991, p.69) in her work on cross-cultural pragmatics argues, one can expect to find a profound and systematic differences in the way different societies or communities speak. These differences can be explained through the examination of the cultural values and priorities that underlie each society or community. In other words, each community has a distinct way of interacting which reflects the cultural values or hierarchies important to it.

Studies on speech acts in varieties of English show the use of different rules or pragmatic conventions. In a study of requesting strategies, Sridhar (1991 in Valentine 1995) finds Indian English speakers from a more traditional background are more direct in their requests as compared to English speakers from a western background. Kitao (1989) notes two main differences in the politeness strategies used in requests by Japanese and American speakers. In comparison to the Americans, Japanese speakers tend to use more negative politeness (minimising imposition on the hearer), if the hearer is more superior than the speaker. This is due to the fact that power is more important and clearer to the Japanese than the Americans. Thus, it is acknowledged and expressed in their communication. Secondly, the Japanese's use of negative politeness is aimed at keeping people outside the group as this is considered a polite form of behaviour. Unlike the Japanese, the Americans polite form of conduct is to include others in their group by using more positive politeness (a desire to seek approval).

In a study on the 'perception of politeness in English requests by Thai EFL learners', Boonjeera Chiravate (2011) discovers that Thai EFL learners' politeness strategies when making a request differed from native English speakers. While their politeness strategies were similar to native speakers when the relationship between the requester and requestee is more distant, their strategies when making requests were less polite when the relationship between the requester and requestee is more intimate, which may be attributed to the participants' L2 proficiency and cultural influences.

Rui Li et. al. (2015) found that Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic interactions were greatly influenced by their cultural background and this, in turn, have produced utterances that could lead to intercultural misunderstandings and ambiguities in meanings. Thus, based on the findings, the researchers recommended that Chinese learners of English be more exposed to the pragmatic conventions of native speakers of the language in order to smoothen communication with other speakers of English.

The above studies demonstrate the communicative styles of English speakers from different cultural and language background vary from one another. Research into

Malaysian English speakers' communicative style is still lacking in the literature. This research, thus, fills in the gap relating to studies on Malaysian styles of communication when expressing the speech act agreement. It can shed light as to how Malaysian Chinese speakers' expression of agreement may be similar or different from other English speakers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks to answer several important questions relating to the agreement strategies performed by Malaysian Chinese while speaking English in a discussion. Using Speech Acts governing agreement, the following research questions are posted:

1. What are the strategies the speakers employ to express agreement during an academic discussion?
2. What are the reasons governing the speakers' choices of language strategies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

CHINESE IN MALAYSIA

Out of 31.7 million population in Malaysia, the Chinese comprise 7.41 million (23.4%) according to a report in Sinar Harian (26 July, 2016). Most Chinese are concentrated mainly in the Western Coast of Peninsula Malaysia, where there's a large concentration of urban settlement. In Eastern Malaysia, they comprise 16% and 28% of Sabah and Sarawak's population respectively.

The earliest Chinese contact with Malayan shores dated back to the 2nd century in Kedah, a northern state in Malay Peninsula during the Langkasuka Empire. In Singapore, there was evidence of their presence as early as the 14th century but it was not until the 16th century that they began to settle in Malacca after the Portuguese conquest. The Dutch occupation in Malaya did not see much increase in Chinese population which remained relatively small and transitory (Shanta Nair-Venugopal 2000, p.25).

It was the establishment of the British settlements in Penang, Singapore and Malacca, which later formed the Straits Settlements, during the late 18th and early 19th centuries that saw the biggest increase in Chinese population in Malaya. Most of them came from China's southern provinces, comprising mainly five speech communities. The first community is from Kwangtung province, consisting of the Teochew and Cantonese. The Hokkien, which forms the single largest group, is from the Fukien province. The Hakka are from the mountain areas of Kwangtung. Finally, from the island of Hainan are the Kwangsi and Fukien, and the Hainanese (Shanta Nair-Venugopal 2000, p.26).

Malaya's geographical location made it a strategic trade route between India and China. Early immigrants were attracted by the commercial opportunities available in the region. The trade in tin, gold, pepper, rattan, sandalwood and camphor were found to be profitable and merchants flocked to the area to gain from it. The second instrumental factor that brought later immigrants to Malaya was the development of new industries. Increased tin production and the establishment of rubber industry saw an influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants mainly as indentured labours. The Chinese dominated the tin industry while the Indians worked in the rubber plantations. The Chinese role is not solely

as a source of labour but Chinese merchants provided financial investments in the development of the tin industry.

In the present day, some of them work in the government sector while the majority is in the public sector. They work as professionals in banks, firms, corporations and service industry, and as technically skilled labour. The rest have their own businesses. (Shanta-Nair Venugopal 2000, p. 26)

FUNDAMENTAL VALUES OF THE CHINESE CULTURE

In order to understand the Chinese, it is important to examine some aspects of their culture particularly their fundamental values, which act as a guiding force in their everyday conduct and behaviour. There are two fundamental values of the Chinese, namely collectivism and intragroup harmony.

Chinese society is generally a collectivistic society. Collectivism is a system based on kinship where one's place in society is established through one's family. A person becomes significant because of his or her family not because of who he or she is. A decision made by an individual has some bearing on his or her family. Thus, a child could be a source of great pride or shame to the family. Originating in the agrarian economy, other collectivistic societies include Asia, Africa, South America, Central America and the Pacific Islands (Hu Wenzhong & Grove 1999).

A discussion on collectivism is not complete without some reference to individualism. These two concepts are not mutually exclusive and best seen as two ends of the same continuum. A society with collectivistic characteristics may also possess some individualistic traits and vice versa. It is never one or the other. While both traits may exist in a society, one tends to be more dominant. In an individualistic society, an individual's existence is a matter of right. Individuals stand independent of their relationship to others, particularly family. They have every right to make decisions and are thus responsible for their choices. In no way are their actions a reflection of their family. Individualistic societies include Europe, Canada, USA, Australia and Canada (Hu Wenzhong & Grove 1999).

Inclinations toward collectivism or individualism can have some bearing on one's behaviour. In a collectivistic society, an individual is seen as part of a larger whole and is subservient to it. In a situation where one's personal goals are in conflict with the collective's, an individual is expected to conform to society's expectations. This is different from an individualistic society where the pursuit of one's goals at the expense of the collective's goals is acceptable and even admired. As stated by Triandis et al. (1988, p. 271);

> Collectivism is characterised by individuals subordinating their personal goals to the goals of some collectives. Individualism is characterised by individual subordinating the goals of collectives to their personal goals. A key belief of people in collectivist cultures is that the smallest unit of survival is the individual. In many situations people in collectivistic cultures have internalised the norms of their collectives so completely that there is no such thing as a distinction between in group goals and personal goals.

While collectivism values conformity and subservience, individualism cultivates independence, assertiveness, self-reliance, self-expression, self-creativity and self-preservation. According to Waterman (1984, pp.4-5) in an individualistic society "…each person is viewed as having a unique set of talents and potentials. The translation of these potentials into actuality is considered the highest purpose to which one can devote one's life. The striving for self-realisation is accompanied by a subjective sense of rightness and personal well-being."

Another fundamental value in Chinese culture is harmony. Confucianism which shapes the Chinese way of life states the aim of human association is in maintaining social harmony. Each member of a community has a social role to upkeep and fulfil; failing which, the very fabric of human society will disintegrate and lead to chaos. The importance of maintaining harmony has resulted in the avoidance of conflict at all cost in any interaction. The "…Chinese believe that the initiation of any kind of dispute is an invitation to chaos. In consequence, they will avoid direct confrontation if possible, and to arrange it indirectly if necessary…" (Bond 1991, pp.65-66 in Spencer-Oatey 2001). Any potential conflict or confrontation will usually be dealt with indirectly or with the use of mediators, who will act as the messenger of unpleasant news. Thus, personal assertiveness, being direct, abrasiveness and expressing anger are criticised. They are viewed as a threat to intragroup harmony.

While personal assertiveness is viewed positively in most Western societies, it is depicted by the Chinese as being selfish. The Chinese word 'qerenzhuyi' may provide further illumination on this notion. Its literal translation is 'one person's doctrine' while its more common meanings are 'individualism' and 'selfishness'. The word expresses the Chinese view that to advance one's personal interest especially at the expense of the collective goals is selfish and generally criticised by others (Hu Wenzhong & Grove 1999).

Expressions of anger are also generally not tolerated even though one may be justified in expressing it. Any dissatisfaction must be dealt with delicately so as not to cause the loss of face. In no way must anger be shown. Hu Wenzhong and Grove (1999, p.67) assert "…An angry person undermines the dignity and well-being of the group and is not considered worthy of respect, thus suffering a serious loss of face". To be angry is to lose control of one's emotions and threatens the face of the speaker and the hearer. Emotions, especially anger must be kept in checked in any interaction if harmony is to be preserved.

Chinese cultural values such as collectivism and preserving intragroup harmony suggest that for the Chinese the group's goals and harmony take precedence over the individual's concern. These values are manifested in their communication with one another and with others. In this research, one would expect Malaysian Chinese speakers' of English to value agreement more than disagreement so as to preserve the group's harmony. Expressions of anger will be avoided as it may lead to a serious loss of face.

POLITENESS PRINCIPLE

Brown and Levinson's (B&L) Politeness Principle (PP) has been found to be useful in describing and explaining language use. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), every person in an interaction attempts to preserve 'face', that is the public self-image that individuals want to claim for themselves. (1987, p.1). The notion 'face' is derived from Goffman (1967) and also from the English folk term 'losing face' which means being embarrassed or humiliated. Face can be divided into two categories: the want or desire to be approved by others (positive politeness) and the want or desire to be unimpeded by others (negative politeness) (Brown and Levinson 1987, p.61). Following their theory, politeness is seen as a concern in managing the face of both the Speaker (S) and Hearer (H) during an interaction.

One's face can be threatened during a course of an interaction by certain illocutionary acts that are said to be intrinsically threatening to S and H's positive and negative face. These acts are called Face Threatening Acts (FTA). Acts that threaten H's negative face include orders, requests, suggestions, advice, reminding, threats, promises

and compliments. While acts that threaten H's Positive face include disapproval, criticism, contempt, ridicule, disagreement, complaints and insults. There also exist acts that offend S's negative face such as expressing thanks, excuses and acceptance of offers. Acts that damages S's positive face are apologies, acceptance of a compliment and confessions.

Brown and Levinson's model of Politeness has over the years come under great scrutiny. The major criticism is directed towards Brown and Levinson's conception of face and their claim over its universal applicability. Their model of politeness has been accused of being ethnocentric, having derived "…directly from the high value based on individualism in western culture" (Kasper 1990, pp. 252-253 in Chen 2001, p.93). As a result, it has come into question as to whether their conception of face can be applied in more collectivistic society whereby the interest of the group is upheld above the individual. Studies into the socio-cultural construct of face have begun to emerge in many more collectivistic society (Mao 1994, Nwoye 1992, de Kadt 1998, Gu 1990 and Matsumoto 1988).

In a study of Igbo society, Nwoye (1992) makes the distinction between individual and group face. Individual face is "the individual's desire to attend to his/her personal needs and to place his/her public self-image above those of others" (p. 313). Group face, may be defined as "…the individual's desire to behave in conformity with culturally expected norms of behaviour that are institutionalised and sanctioned by society" (Nwoye 1992, p.313.) In Igbo society, face metaphorically refers to shame, honour, good and bad fortune which are linked to the group one is associated. The shame suffered by an individual is also a burden bear upon by the group, that is, the nuclear family, the extended family, the clan, the village etc.

Mao's study of the Chinese face reveals two very related concepts, 'lian' and 'mianzi'. Lian refers to "…the respect of the group for man with a good moral reputation" (Hu 1944, p.45 in Mao 1994, p. 457) while mianzi refers to one's "…prestige or reputation which is either achieved through getting on in life…, or ascribed (or even imagined) by other members of one's own community…" (Hu 1994, p. 457). Mao argues the difference between Brown and Levinson's and Chinese face is that the former focuses more on the individual while the latter on the collective. He states it

> "…encodes a reputable image that individuals can claim for themselves as they interact with others in a given community; it is intimately linked to the views of the community and to the community's judgement and perception of the individual's character and behaviour". (1994, p. 460)

The above studies demonstrate that Brown and Levinson's conception of face is by no means universal. While their model of politeness may appeal to more individualistic society such as in the UK or USA, it has little place in more collectivistic society such as Japanese, Chinese or Igbo. However, one may argue, that no one society is truly individualistic or collectivistic. These two orientations are not mutually exclusive. They should be seen rather as two ends of the same continuum. While a society can be said to be predominantly individualistic or collectivistic, it is not solely one or the other. Therefore, the same may be said of 'face'. It is as much an individual as well as a group construct much like the one proposed by Nyowe (1992).

Following Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Principles, the speech act agreement supports the hearer's positive face. The research seeks to discover the strategies employed by the participants when expressing agreement while preserving the speaker's and hearer's face during a discussion. Face is perceived as both an individual and a group construct. On the one hand, it is "the individual's desire to attend to his/her personal needs and to place his/her public self-image above those of others" (Nyowe 1992, p.313). On the

other hand, it is "…the individual's desire to behave in conformity with culturally expected norms of behaviour that are institutionalised and sanctioned by society" (ibid.).

AGREEMENT STRATEGIES

Studies into agreement acts have been investigated within the framework of discourse analysis (Schriffin 1984), conversational analysis (Pomerantz 1984, Kotkoff 1993, Sai-huo Kuo 1994), pragmatics (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998, Jamaliah Mohd Ali 2000) and politeness theory (Valentine 1995, Holmes 1995, Reese-Miller 2000, Scheerhorn 1991). Following Reese-Miller's definition, agreement can thus be defined as "…A speaker S agrees when s/he considers true some Proposition P uttered or presumed to be espoused by an Addressee A and reacts with an utterance the propositional content or implicature is P or in support of P". An agreement can be expressed either explicitly or implicitly. It can also be expressed by using minimal responses, building upon the previous speaker's turn and repetition.

The study of agreement is synonymous with Pomerantz's (1984) conversational analytic based on the concept of 'preference'. Preference is defined as "…a range of phenomenon associated with the fact that choices among nonequivalent courses of action are routinely implemented in ways that reflect an institutional ranking of alternatives. Despite its connotations, the term is not intended to reference personal, subjective, or 'psychological' desires of dispositions" (Atkinson and Heritage 1984, p. 53 in Kotthoff 1993, p. 193). Pomerantz discovers in ordinary friendly talk, agreement is a preferred response compared to disagreement because participants are oriented toward interpersonal coordination. It is performed with minimal delay, with direct explicit formulation, and without prefacing or qualification.

Jamaliah Mohd Ali's (2000) study on the verbal interaction of Malaysian English speakers in an academic setting shows the subjects engaging in a co-operative participation in building up discussions. They have more tendency to express agreement rather than disagreement. Some of the strategies they used when expressing agreement are using personal names, echoing all or part of the previous speaker's utterance, repeating an utterance twice or more and using the phrase 'you know'. She has coined this style of interacting as 'duetting' and 'philharmony'. They express how two or more speakers work "closely together, cooperating and monitoring each other's performance throughout, processing what others have said and done and making their contributions appropriately" (2000, p.89). They do this by latching on to the speaker's utterance, overlapping, interrupting, echoing what is said and repeating information. This interactional style is motivated by a feeling of camaraderie or a way of expressing solidarity.

If Malaysian English speaker's verbal interaction tend to be cooperative, a group of Jewish Americans in Philadelphia was found to be argumentative (Schriffin 1984). They repeatedly express disagreement by contradicting, denying or negatively evaluating each others' utterances. They compete for the floor and remain nonaligned with each other. This style of interaction is not viewed negatively by the speakers but is considered a display of their solidarity.

For Indian English speakers in Valentine's (1995) study, they express agreement by using explicit statement of agreement, building upon the previous speaker's turn, repeating part or complete component of a speaker's previous turn, by delaying and by hedging. He also discovers, Indian English speakers would weigh both sides of an argument as a strategy to strengthen their position. Other English speakers' though may perceive this act as "not getting to the point" (Valentine 1995, p.243).

In gender studies, Holmes (1995) discovers in a public setting, women express more agreement than men. They contribute positively by building on the other speaker's ideas, providing encouraging feedback and the use of back channelling. Men, however, are more competitive and dominating in their talk. They express bald disagreement and constantly challenge other speakers' utterances. This is supported by Coates (1989) and Pilkington's (1992) studies. They discover that women in their speech would collaborate with each other to 'produce shared meanings' by building on and completing the previous speaker's utterance.

Ethnicity and gender are not the only factors that affect how agreement is expressed. Sai-huo Kuo (1994) discovers in a radio conversation between a male psychologist and a female caller, it is power and professional status and not gender which affect the speakers' strategic choices. Politeness Principles are adhered more by the less powerful speaker rather than the male psychologist. Agreement is expressed by the use of repetition, upgraded agreement and back-channel responses.

The studies described above show how the speech act of agreement could be affected by a number of variables such as gender, ethnicity, power and context.

METHODOLOGY

DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

The participants chosen were 17 Sixth Form students of Chinese origin from a school in Kuala Lumpur. Out of this number, 9 were males and 8 were females. They were 18 and 19 years old of Lower Sixth and Upper Sixth Form students respectively. In terms of socio-economic background, the students came from middle-class income group, where the parents were businessmen, managers, accountants or engineers. All the participants were fairly active in the school's co-curricular activities, all of whom held posts in one society or the other. It was important for them to be active in co curricular activities as it would help them to find a place in universities after their Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM) examination. Cantonese was their first language while English was either their second or third language. They were fairly proficient in English, scoring between Band 3 to Band 5 of the MUET test.

PROCEDURE

The data for the research was collected by two means, namely audio recording of the discussions and review sessions of the recordings. The discussion was a simulation of a Malaysian University English Test (MUET) speaking test. The students were divided into groups of four, consisting of two males and two females. Altogether, seven groups were formed. It should be noted, some students were involved in more than one discussion. Each group of four students was given a topic similar to the ones one would expect to find in a MUET speaking test. (Refer to Table 1 for details of students' discussion recorded).

TABLE 1. Details of student discussions' recorded

No.	Topics	Duration	No. of participants	Participants' roles and names		Gender
1	The most important criterion for the Most Outstanding Student of the Year Award	14 mins	4	A – SS B – J	C – KT D – RP	2 males 2 females
2	Role model a teenager would most likely prefer	14 mins	4	A – SS B – J	C – KT D – RP	2 males 2 females
3	Measures which would be most effective in reducing road accidents	11 mins	4	A – WJ B – FY	C – SY D – K	2 males 2 females
4	The most important criterion for the Most Outstanding Student of the Year Award	18 mins	4	A – WJ B – FY	C – SY D – K	2 males 2 females
5	The causes and solutions to child abuse cases	18 mins	4	A – CL B – PC	C – M D – KH	2 males 2 females
6	The most effective measures to be taken to improve the conditions of the polluted river	8 mins	4	A – M B – PC	C – P D – WS	2 males 2 females
7	The ways to overcome discipline problems in schools	20 mins	4	A – CL B – SL	C – LM D – KS	2 males 2 females

The students were given one minute to read through the task given after which time was allocated for inquiries into meaning of words and further clarification of the task at hand. They were then given two minutes to make notes for Task B, the Group Discussion before proceeding with the actual discussion. The discussions took place after school hours in one of the rooms in the school library. It was important that a quiet room was chosen so as to minimise any disrupting noises such as traffic from the nearby road and noises from the classes.

The discussions were recorded with the permission of the students. The recorder was placed in the middle of the table to ensure a clear recording. Initially the students were very conscious of its presence. There were once or twice, recordings had to be stopped at the beginning of a discussion because the students were inhibited by its presence thus impeding their contribution. However, after a while as the discussion began to develop, they began to take little notice of it. The length of the recording varies from eight to twenty minutes. In an actual test, the examiner would have stopped the discussion when it reached ten minutes due to time constraint. However, the researcher felt this was not necessary as it would allow exhaustive treatment of the topic. This was also to allow further examination of the agreement strategies employed by the students.

One of the limitations of using audio recorder is that it does not capture non-verbal information such as facial expressions, gestures, postures, gaze and so forth. For example, agreement can be expressed by nodding one's head. This is perhaps one of the limitations of the study in that it only focuses on the linguistic aspect of agreement strategies.

The researcher cum examiner acted as participant observer throughout the discussion. The researcher's role was limited to occasional prompting especially in getting the group to form a conclusion and seek clarification on the points raised. For example, in Transcription 4 lines 176 – 182 the students were having difficulty coming up with a conclusion since they could not agree on the criteria for choosing the most outstanding student of the year. The researcher asked them to form a conclusion based on the overall discussion. Since no agreement could be reached, each student proceeded to state an individual stand.

FY: (176)   Of course we must choose one of criteria to nominate most outstanding student of the year
         (177)   since than we can't conclude anything
AA: (178)   **Okay you can't seem to agree right**
         (179)   but I mean based on the discussion you know
         (180)   what would you say about the discussion
         (181)   you know as to you know aah the decision that you come up with
         (182)   three of you agree that

The researcher also sought clarification especially when a possibility for misunderstanding emerged. In Transcription 5 line 55, KH raised a point on promoting 'big families'. "Big families' usually refer to having a large number of children but in this case he was referring to extended families which include grandparents, uncles, aunts and so forth.

| AA: | (55) | **So you mean by larger families would be extended families** |
| KH: | (56) | Extended families should be promoted |

Further clarification was needed in line 128 and 130 when the other three students misunderstood the term 'extended family' to refer to big family. Again here, KH was asked to clarify the term.

AA:	(128)	**So when you say extended [family do you mean] =**
KH:	(129)	= [extended family include] thegrandmother and the aunties [and] even ( ) =
AA:	(130)	**= [right] So not necessarily having twelve kids =**
KH:	(131)	= not necessarily [but]
AA:	(132)	**[but] I mean even [four kids ( )]**
KH:	(133)	[But if everyone have] four kids we can have one to guard over them for four hours maybe
	(134)	and then the next mum to guard over her guard over those children =
AA:	(135)	**= right =**
KH:	(136)	= so we take turns
	(137)	and that's a lot better instead of one caring for four all day

REVIEW SESSION

The review sessions were conducted a few weeks after the recordings to allow the researcher time to analyse the data and form questions to pose to the participants. Along with the researcher, the participants listened to the recordings as they were played back. The sessions proved to be insightful for the researcher in understanding the strategies they had adopted in their discussions and to seek clarification.

For turn-taking, in Transcription 1 line 8, SS apologised for interrupting J even though he had reached a TRP. When asked to clarify, SS said she felt she was interrupting J as he may have intended to say further. J, on the other hand, did not view this as an interruption which only confirms the notion that interruption is an interpretive act to be negotiated between the participants. In this particular study, there were not many instances that would require a review session considering the agreement speech act is less complex and fairly straightforward and the literature reviewed supports its use for interpersonal coordination (Pomerantz 1984, Jamaliah Mohd Ali 2000).

J:	(7)	so based on the title the most outstanding student of the year award I should we should give more credit to the ones that perform well academically
SS:	(8)	**Sorry to interrupt**
	(9)	but I think that those who have shown outstanding performance in sports they have better qualities in aah should we say

TOOL OF ANALYSIS

SPEECH ACTS

Speech Act theory was firstly conceived by the Oxford philosopher John Austin who believes that language is not only used to convey information but most importantly to perform actions. Although its initial conception was grounded in the philosophy of

language, it was later incorporated into linguistic theory by Austin's main proponent, the American philosopher John Searle. Searle defines speech acts as "…the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication" (1969, p. 6 in Mey 2001, p. 93) placing it firmly into the study of language. Searle states that "…The unit of linguistic communication is not, as has generally been supposed, the symbol, word or sentence…but rather the production of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act." (ibid.) This view allows for the study of speech acts' production, interpretation and meaning.

A speech act can be analysed on three levels; the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary act. A locutionary act "involves the uttering of an expression with sense and reference, i.e., using sounds and words with meaning…An illocutionary act is the act performed "…in saying" the locution…, such that what was said that the force (not the meaning) of that illocution…A perlocutionary act is the "consequential effects" …of an utterance on an interlocutor, i.e., what is achieved "by saying" something." (Schriffin, 1994, pp. 53-54).

In the following utterance, "I don't agree with famous film stars government businessmen or all others" (Transcription 2 line 31). On the level of locution, this involves the meaning of the words uttered. At the illocutionary level, he is performing the act of disagreement which is indicated by the performative verb 'don't agree'. However, there are instances in which a performative verb is not a necessary requirement in the expression of an act. The speech act disagreement can be expressed without the use of the verb 'disagree' as in the case of indirect speech acts. The perlocutionary act is the effect the utterance has on the hearer, who has to respond by expressing agreement or disagreement.

Just as Austin establishes certain textual and contextual conditions that must be fulfilled for defining speech acts, so did Searle. He establishes four conditions; propositional content, preparatory, sincerity and essential conditions. Propositional content conditions are concerned with the propositional act, the reference and predication of the utterance. Preparatory conditions "…involve background circumstances and knowledge about S and H that must hold prior to….the performance of the act." (Schriffin 1994, p.56). The sincerity condition is concerned with "…S's psychological state as it is expressed in the performance of an illocutionary act." The final condition, the essential condition involves "the point of the act" (Searle 1969, p. 59 in Schriffin 1994, p. 56)

The first three conditions fall under 'regulative' type of rules while the last is a 'constitutive' rule. Constitutive rules "…create or define new forms of behaviour" (Searle 1969, p. 33 in Schriffin 1994, p. 55). They are the necessary conditions for a particular illocutionary act to occur. Regulative rules, on the other hand, "…regulate independently existing forms of behaviour." (ibid.)

The following conditions should hold for the act of agreement:

Agreement
1) Propositional content condition: Expressing agreement with the previous speaker's assertion
2) Preparatory condition: the speaker has adequate information to form a 'valid' opinion about the assertion
3) Sincerity condition: the speaker believes there is truth in the assertion
4) Essential condition: An assertion is proposed by a previous speaker.

FINDINGS

Analysis of the data reveals there were 5 agreement strategies identified in the discussions. During the discussions, the students expressed the speech act of agreement by directly agreeing with the previous speaker, building upon the previous speaker's turn, completing and repeating part of the previous speaker's utterance and giving positive feedback (see Figure 1 below). Of all the strategies, the most often employed and sustained throughout the discussions is positive feedback. This is followed by building upon utterances, completion of the previous speaker's utterance and direct agreement.
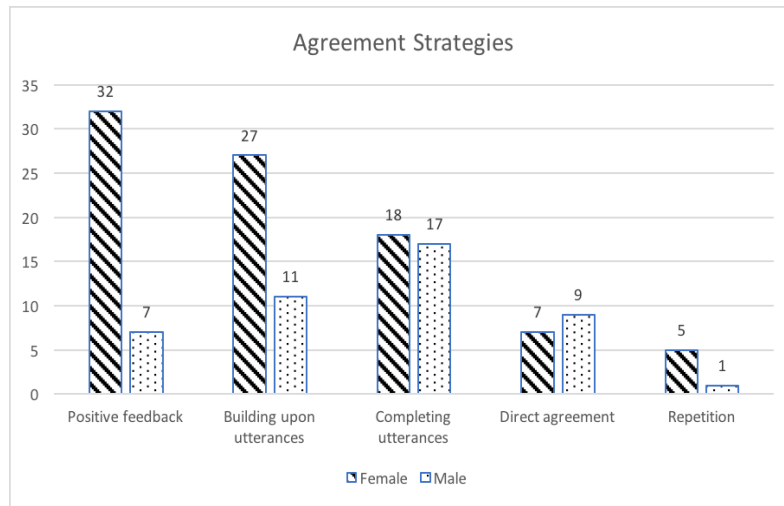

FIGURE 1. Agreement strategies

Expressions of agreement, which support the hearer's positive face, are less complex. The expression of agreement helps to preserve harmony among the group members and promote solidarity. Chinese cultural values such as collectivism and preserving intragroup harmony suggest that for the Chinese the group's goals and harmony take precedence over individual's concern. These values are manifested in their communication with one another and with others through the expressions of agreement.

Apart from Chinese cultural values which may influence the group's agreement strategies, the findings also reveal that gender also has an influence on the participants' choice of agreement strategies since four out of the five strategies are mainly employed by the female participants. Female speakers in this research are more supportive than the male speakers. They showed agreement and support for the previous speaker's talk by giving positive feedback, building upon utterances, completing utterances and repeating part of the previous speaker's utterance. The finding supports previous research into men and women's talk, that is, women are more supportive and collaborative in their talk (Holmes 1995).

POSITIVE FEEDBACK

There were many instances of speakers using positive feedbacks such as 'Ya', 'Yes', 'Uuh uuh' and 'hhmm' to express a number of functions. They were employed to show agreement, to support the speaker or to indicate the listener's attentive attention (Coates 1998, p.237). It can be used to mean either 'I agree with what you are saying' or 'I'm with you' or 'I understand what you're saying so please go on'. They are placed mainly at a Transitional Relevant Place (TRP) or overlaps with the current speaker's utterance.

However, they are not an attempt by the speaker to take the floor. It is more of an indication of their involvement in the interaction rather than a fight for a turn as demonstrated in Transcription 2 line 64 and 65. In the analysis, it was the female speakers who employed this strategy the most. 32 out of 39 utterances of the positive feedback strategy were conveyed by them to show support of the previous speaker's speech.

J:	(63)	Hhhm excuse me it doesn't mean if you're a businessman you're old and ( ) =
RP:	(64)	= **yes**
SS:	(65)	**yes** =
RP:	(66)	= even like Bill Gates don't even fifty yet

Positive feedback was the most often employed strategy among the participants especially the female participants. They use this strategy to show agreement, to support the speaker or to indicate the listener's attentive attention.

BUILDING UPON THE PREVIOUS SPEAKERS' TURN

When building upon the previous speaker's turn, the current speaker would include additional points, reasons or details in order to claim common ground and show support of the previous speaker's utterance (Valentine 1995, p.231). This strategy is the second most employed strategy during the discussions. Out of the 38 utterances, 27 were expressed by the female speakers, demonstrating women to be more supportive in their talk (Holmes 1995, Coates 1989)

In Transcription 5 line 7-83, the participants provided an uninterrupted listing of the causes of child abuse. PC suggested one of the causes of child abuse is broken families. The stress of family problem may cause the parent to abuse the child. She is supported by M who added that there are cases in which the abuse is done by the stepparent. CL further added the reason for this is because the stepparents may view the stepchild as a burden be it financially or emotionally. Another cause of child abuse which is provided by KH is the disintegration of extended family. It usually acts as a support system for the nuclear family. Grandparents, uncles and aunts could help alleviate stress by taking care of the children on some days.

PC:	(7)	I think one of the causes is family problem happening in the family of the abuse child
	(8)	usually we see cases of child abuse
	(9)	**they come from family which are broken family**
	(10)	in a sense that the parents are divorced
	(11)	or the father has has another woman outside
	(12)	so it causes hurt to the child
	(13)	and then other than that the father is stressed
	(14)	because he has so many problem of his own
	(15)	so he abuse his child to release his tension so
M:	(16)	**And maybe this problem is caused by the stepparents**
	(17)	we're more talking about the stepparents cause by this kind of unproper family
	(18)	they will certainly found found out that mostly the stepparents who will abuse the child
	(19)	because they are not their own child
CL:	(20)	**Furthermore they'll think that children as a burden to them**
	(21)	**no matter in financial emotionally and etcetera etcetera**
KH:	(22)	Perhaps ( ) violence can be caused by such problems
	(23)	so I think is I've been thinking of the past
	(24)	when in those days in 1980 something or before that 1970 **( ) child abuse rarely happens**
	(25)	**and partly because of family relationships**
	(26)	**because in those days we use to have big big families**
	(27)	**and then big families would be aunties and then stepmothers and then**

	(28)	**that's okay everything's fine b'cause they take turns to take care of the child**
	(29)	I've seen families around twelve kids
	(30)	I'm not saying in one family in a large family they have around twelve kids
	(31)	and they manage them well without any child abuse
	(32)	Stress is of course part of the problem
	(33)	but stress (comes) in a lot of ways

CL added, in this day and age of modernisation, with both parents working, the care of the child usually falls in the hands of maids who may also abuse the child. Furthermore, people who were victims of abuse as children could also become the abuser when they become parents later.

AA:	(55)	So you mean by larger families would be extended families
KH:	(56)	Extended families should be promoted
CL:	(57)	**Ya besides that nowadays especially in our modern days many parents are working**
	(58)	**so as they're busy in their career they have no time to take care of their child**
	(59)	**So one of the best way for them is to dump their children to the maids housemaids**
	(60)	no matter Filipino maids or Indonesian maids
	(61)	so the maids just ignore the (affair)
	(62)	and think that because the children are not theirs
	(63)	so (beside) of neglecting them they also torturing them
	(64)	For example when a small child is crying because of
	(65)	hunger the maid just ignore him or even worse they use some iron or anything to beat him up
	(79)	they do a lot of torturing to them
PC:	(67)	Aah I wanted to add aah add to the first point about family problem is
	(68)	**sometimes the parents themselves grow up in an environment that they were being abuse as a child**
	(69)	that means they grow up in broken families
	(70)	and were abuse were an abuse victim
	(71)	so because they grow up in such an environment they tend to have psychological they tend to be =
KH:	(72)	= shadowed shadowed by the past =
PC:	(73)	= shadow ya shadowed by the past past experience
	(74)	**so they psychologically they they tend to feel that they as a parent now**
	(75)	**they have the right to abuse their child**
	(76)	and that's why this problem goes on
M:	(77)	And mostly for the parents now as what Lim said most of them are working
	(78)	so they spend most of the time working working outside
	(79)	and they have the stress they have the tension everything

In a discussion of ways to overcome discipline problems (Transcription 7 line 190 – 212), LM suggests counselling as an effective means in which students can relief their burden. SL adds counsellors should work together with teachers and parents to help identify the problem faced by the indiscipline student. This is further supported by CL who states counsellors can help the student to identify solutions to their problems and provide emotional support. As stated by LM, counsellors are usually well-trained so they are more equipped to handle these students.

LM:	(190)	= this type of stressing about this kind of stress their having
	(191)	like I have once I think I have a few times frequently I've been to see the counselor
	(192)	not because of like I'm having a major problem
	(193)	just because to ease myself
	(194)	sometimes I'd like to talk to the counselor to aah
	(195)	so that it will it will ease myself
	(196)	and then yes I'm not a problem student
	(197)	**but there are I see as a counsellor try to have a good talk with them**
	(198)	**where it is really effective**

	(199)	where they really tell her their problem
	(200)	and at least they will feel they are being accepted I think valued by the certain teachers
	(201)	because they think themselves are not not in the context of other teachers they are like problem students
	(202)	but but after they talk to the counselor they feel that they are more acceptable
	(203)	because they know that the counsellor is actually know understand the situation they're in
CL:	(204)	Yes
SL:	(205)	**I think that this counselling should come should be an effort between the counsellors the teachers and the parents**
CL:	(206)	**I do believe that the counsellor has or possess a very effective way to help the students**
	(207)	for example not just only provide the counselling by just talking to them
	(208)	he or she will tell him a technique or a way for him or for this student to overcome their problem in a very long ( ) way
	(209)	not only by talking but also give them motivation or mental support
LM:	(210)	**And mostly the counsellor they are well trained**
	(211)	they know this kind of they know psychology well
	(212)	they know how to tackle the students and even the parents

Building upon the previous speaker's turn is the second most employed strategy. The participants would build upon each other's speech by adding points, reasons, details in order to claim common ground and show support with one another. While the Chinese cultural values may have some influence over their choice, gender is another important explanatory factor. Since the majority of the utterances are employed by the female participants, this finding would suggest that gender rather than Chinese cultural values is the motivating factor behind the current strategy.

COMPLETING THE PREVIOUS SPEAKER'S UTTERANCE

There were instances of the participants completing each other's utterances by supplying words or phrases. The next speaker usually latches onto the current speaker's speech, completing or providing him/her with words or short phrases (Valentine 1995). They do this particularly when the current speaker is struggling to complete a point. The current speaker then repeats the phrase to show acceptance, appreciation or agreement. This strategy is a demonstration of support and agreement and to indicate the listener's attentive attention. In order for the current speaker to complete the previous speaker's utterance, careful attention must be paid to the previous speaker's speech in order to anticipate possible words or phrases to complete the utterance. In the discussions, more than half of the utterances were expressed by the female participants. In completing the previous speaker's utterance, they provide support for the talk (Holmes 1995).

In Transcription 7 line 38, LM completed CL's utterance when he takes some time to think of a suitable word, which is indicated by the phrase "they maybe some you know". This is a strategy commonly adopted by speakers to buy them more time as they search for suitable words. CL then repeats the phrases provided by LM as an appreciation of her support.

CL:	(34)	In my opinion I don't think the power or the particular teacher is able to control the amount of student in his or her class
	(35)	but this if this the problem here is who is the most suitable person to carry out this system
	(36)	is it the form teacher the disciplinary board sorry the disciplinary board the prefects or who if depend on the prefect
	(37)	as we know there are prefects they may be some you know =
LM:	(38)	= **maybe prejudice [or discrimination]**
CL:	(39)	**[ya prejudice or] discrimination** against the students
	(40)	so I don't think with this kind of without planning system without proper planning this system will really work

In Transcription 5 line 209, KH completes PC's utterance after she struggles for the appropriate word which is expressed by the utterance 'how do I say they how do I say'. PC repeats the phrase provided by KH before continuing with her turn.

PC:	(197)	[Okay] One more thing if they if they have these type of problem
	(198)	they should seek help at those counselling or psychological centres
	(199)	they should know that they have this problem
	(200)	they cannot run away from their problem
	(201)	If they seek help there's possibility that they can recover from their psychological
	(202)	what I mean is matters they can recover they will lead better lives
	(203)	and their children will lead better lives
	(204)	because they won't abuse their children
	(205)	and so the problem is the parents they should accept that they have certain problem they have psychological problem
	(206)	most of the parents have psychological problem if not they wouldn't
	(207)	because their children are their own they their children they
	(208)	how do I say they how do I say it their children is their asset they =
KH:	(209)	= **gift of God** =
PC:	(210)	= Ya **gift of God** to them
	(211)	They should take proper care of their children
	(212)	and they should treasure their children
	(213)	so the parents who abuse their children they have problem
	(214)	and they should seek psychological help

Another example is in Transcription 5 line 120. In this instance, M's utterance overlaps with CL as she provides additional word to complete his utterance. Although CL in this case is not struggling for words, M's action serves to support and reinforce his point. As an acknowledgement and appreciation for M's support CL repeats the word she provides.

CL:	(116)	= for example my brother who has two children
	(117)	he feels very happy because one daughter one son
	(118)	and he and sister-in-law can concentrate everything to them
	(119)	that means provided the best no matter in food [clothes]
M:	(120)	[**education**]
CL:		**education** and etcetera
	(121)	Imagine that you have ten kids
	(122)	if you can you think that you can afford just go ahead
	(123)	but not many people [will] think such way =

An utterance can also be completed by two speakers. For example, in Transcription 7 line 223 – 225, KS and LM work cooperatively to complete SL's utterance.

SL:	(220)	= Okay I think this counselling this counselling should be an effort between the teachers counsellors and parents
	(221)	we should also have a little bit of punishment for those problem students =
LM:	(222)	= uuh uuh =
SL:	(223)	= because I think the punishment that they =
KS:	(224)	= **they are implemented** =
LM:	(225)	= **uuh uuh must not be too harsh** =
SL:	(226)	= **must not be too harsh**
	(227)	and then this would be also a way to remind the students not to repeat the same way again

Completing the previous speaker's utterance is the third most employed strategy in the findings. The next speaker usually latches onto the current speaker's speech, completing the speech by supplying words or phrases. They do this especially when the

current speaker is struggling to complete the utterance. Female participants in the research are more supportive and attentive since more than half of the utterances were from the female participants. In order for them to complete the previous speaker's utterance, they must pay careful attention to the previous speaker's speech in order to anticipate possible words or phrases to complete the utterance. In doing so, they provide support for their talk (Holmes 1995). Similar to the previous strategy, gender rather than culture may be the main motivating factor.

<div align="center">DIRECT AGREEMENT</div>

The students' expressions of direct agreement commit them to the content of the previous speaker's turn (Valentine 1995, p.230). Not only is it the clearest form of expressing agreement but it is also the most emotive. It expresses both their opinion as well as their feelings toward the issue. All the expressions are stated at the beginning of a turn. They include the following utterances:

'I agree with SS' Transcription 1 line 15
'Correct' Transcription 1 line 44
'Ya I do agree with WJ with what she has said' Transcription 3 line 22
'This is true' Transcription 4 line 202
'Ya, that's true' Transcription 5 line 273

In a discussion of the most important criterion for the award of the Most Outstanding Student of the Year, KT disagrees with SS's proposition of choosing those who are good in sports (Transcription 1 line 40). When J challenges RP's assertion that athletes are disciplined, KT expressed complete agreement with J. His utterance 'Correct' not only reveals his opinion but also his strong feelings toward the subject. His feeling is based on his experience as a prefect in school, whereby most school athletes have discipline problems. Thus, it had led him to form such conclusion.

SS:	(38)	Well when they go in sports well if they're good in sports and academically
	(39)	but it's just like a stepping stone or maybe it's like it gives them more advantages than being good in only in their studies and not in their sports
KT:	(40)	No how about if they did not show any good examples
RP:	(41)	If they are an athletes they are discipline in themselves
	(42)	I'm sure that they can lead others too
J:	(43)	How sure that once you're athlete then you're self-discipline =
KT:	(44)	= **correct**

All the examples identified in the data indicate that Direct Agreement is the second least used strategy. It is the clearest form of expressing agreement and it commits the speaker to the previous speaker's point of view. Participants, however, prefer to employ other agreement strategies that support the previous speakers. Malaysian Chinese cultural values such as preserving intragroup harmony and establishing solidarity may be the underlying factors influencing their choice.

<div align="center">REPEATING PART OF THE PREVIOUS SPEAKER'S UTTERANCE</div>

Repetition serves to show agreement and indicate the speaker's involvement (Valentine 1995, p.233). Speakers would repeat part of the previous speaker's utterance. In the data gathered, there were only 6 instances of the use of repetition, 5 out of which are expressed by the female participants. This strategy allows them to express more involvement in their talk. For example, KH suggests that reporting child abuse cases to the police should be a

second option rather than the first. In Transcription 5 line 256, PC repeats KH's utterance to stress agreement.

KH:	(246)	[But before] reporting any such cases what I think
		is that they should actually talk to the parents
	(247)	instead of just going to the police station
	(248)	and get everything right that seem to be right [( )]
PC:	(249)	[Well now if if]
		talking to the parents does not give a solution then that is the way they should do =
KH:	(250)	= **that is the second option**
	(251)	what I mean is =
PC:	(252)	= Ya =
KH:	(253)	= **try to make it a second option** =
PC:	(254)	= Ya =
KH:		=
	(255)	instead of the first =
PC:	(256)	= **Maybe that should be the second option**
	(257)	talking to the abuser is the first option that has to be done =

In another example in a discussion of the ways to overcome river pollution, WS argues enforcement officers do not do an effective job in curbing the problem as they usually take bribes. His view is supported by PC who repeats part of his utterance.

PC:	(10)	Ya what you mean is that actually you we think that enforcement
		officer should have stringent check on factories which are situated near the aah river so [
		(they're safe)] =
P:	(11)	[they should check]
PC:	(12)	= they should have enforcement officer going to the river and
		checking on the pollution rate [(in the) river]
P:	(13)	[aah the level] the level of the
		pollution =
WS:	(14)	= but I think its not effective because **the authorities take**
		takes bribes
PC:	(15)	Ya in another way enforcement officers cannot be trusted
	(16)	because **some actually take bribes** from the factories
		[that they cover up] =
WS:	(17)	[most of them]
PC:	(18)	= they cover up the pollution

In the data gathered, 5 out of 6 of the utterances are expressed by the female participants. Speakers would repeat part of the previous speaker's utterance to show more involvement and support. The findings suggest that gender is more salient than the speakers' cultural values.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the research reveal that the participants expressed the speech act of agreement by directly agreeing with the previous speaker, building upon the previous speaker's turn, completing and repeating part of the previous speaker's utterance and giving positive feedback. The agreement strategies most often employed by the students are positive feedback, building upon utterances and completing utterances.

Expressions of agreement following Brown and Levinson's Politeness Principle, support the hearer's positive face and are less complex. The agreement strategies help to preserve harmony among the group members and promote solidarity. Chinese cultural values such as collectivism and preserving intragroup harmony suggest that for the Chinese the group's goals and harmony take precedence over individual's concern such as scoring a higher mark than the other speakers in the group during the academic discussion.

These values are manifested in their communication with one another through the expressions of agreement. One could argue, though, based on the findings, the women demonstrated more concern over preserving intragroup harmony and promoting solidarity than the men in an academic discussion. I would not claim that the speakers in this study demonstrated a complete subservience and conformity as espoused by a culture of collectivism since they did demonstrate aspects of individualism such as assertiveness and self-expression when they disagreed with other speakers. What the findings suggest is they would find opportunities to show solidarity with the group when the situation arises. As I have argued above, no one society is truly individualistic or collectivistic. These two orientations are not mutually exclusive but should be seen rather as two ends of the same continuum. While a society can be said to be predominantly individualistic or collectivistic, it is not solely one or the other. Similarly, face is perceived as both an individual and a group construct (Nyowe 1992). The participants in this study had thus attended to both constructs of 'face'.

The findings in this research is similar to Pomerantz (1984) discovery that in ordinary friendly talk, participants expressed agreement with minimal delay, with direct explicit formulation, and without prefacing or qualification as part of interpersonal coordination. An agreement can be expressed either explicitly or implicitly, through the use of minimal responses, building upon the previous speaker's turn and repetition. It is also similar to Valentine's (1995) study on Indian English speakers, which show that they express agreement by using explicit statement of agreement, building upon the previous speaker's turn, and repeating part or complete component of a speaker's previous turn. The exception is the participants in this study did not utilise delaying, hedging and weighing both sides of an argument as a strategy to strengthen his/her position, which seemed unique to the Indian English speakers. The findings are also similar to Jamaliah Mohd Ali's (2000) study of Malaysian English speakers, that some of the strategies they used when expressing agreement are echoing all or part of the previous speaker's utterance and repeating an utterance twice or more with the exception of using personal names and using the phrase 'you know'. Thus, there are some similarities and differences in the use of agreement strategies utilised by the participants in this study as compared to previous researches.

In this study, the female students' preferred agreement strategies also followed the above general findings. However, the male students prefer, in order of frequency, completing the previous speaker's utterance, building upon the previous speakers' utterance, expressing direct agreement, giving positive feedback and repeating part of the previous speaker's utterance. Generally, the female speakers employed more agreement strategies (89 utterances/ 66%) than the male speakers (45 utterances/ 34%). The findings suggest that gender rather than the Chinese cultural values has a more significant influence in the participants' choice of agreement strategies since four out of the five strategies were mainly employed by the female participants. Furthermore, the female speakers generally tend to employ nearly double the agreement strategies to that of the male speakers.

The findings in this study are supported by Holmes (1995) study where she discovers that in a public setting, women express more agreement than men. They contribute positively by building on the other speaker's ideas, providing encouraging feedback and the use of back channelling. This is further supported by Coates (1989, p.118) and Pilkington's (1992) studies, where they discover that women in their speech would collaborate with each other "…to produce shared meanings" by building on and completing the previous speaker's utterance. While the men in Holmes study were more competitive and dominating in their talk, the male speakers in this study do demonstrate being supportive in their talk even though it is not as often as the female speakers.

CONCLUSION

The data reveals 5 agreement strategies that are employed by Malaysian Chinese speakers of English during academic discussions. The findings from the research reveal that the participants expressed the speech act of agreement by directly agreeing with the previous speaker, building upon the previous speaker's turn, completing and repeating part of the previous speaker's utterance and giving positive feedback. The agreement strategies most often employed by the students are positive feedback, building upon utterances and completing utterances.

Expressions of agreement, which support the hearer's positive face, are less complex. The expression of agreement helps to preserve harmony among the group members and promote solidarity. Chinese cultural values such as collectivism and preserving intragroup harmony suggest that for the Chinese the group's goals and harmony take precedence over individual's concern. These values are manifested in their communication with one another through the expressions of agreement.

The findings also reveal that gender also has a considerable influence in the participants' choice of agreement strategies since four out of the five strategies were mainly employed by the female participants. Female speakers were more supportive than the male speakers. They showed agreement and support for the previous speaker's talk by giving positive feedback, building upon utterances, completing utterances and repeating part of the previous speaker's utterance. The finding supports previous research into men and women's talk, that is, women are more supportive and collaborative in their talk (Holmes 1995).

TRANSCRIPTION NOTATION

(Gail Jefferson 1979 in Schriffin 1994, p. 242)

1. Simultaneous utterances
[[- Utterances starting simultaneously are linked together with either double or single left-handed brackets

2. Overlapping utterances
[- When overlapping utterances do not start simultaneously, the point at which an ongoing utterance is joined by another is marked with a single left-hand bracket, linking an ongoing with an overlapping utterance at the point where overlap begins.
] - The point where overlapping utterances stop overlapping is marked with a single right-hand bracket.

3. Contiguous utterances
= - When there is no interval between adjacent utterances, the second being latched immediately to the first (without overlapping it), the utterances are linked together with equal signs. The equal signs are also used to link different parts of a single speaker's utterance when those parts constitute a continuous flow of speech that has been carried over to another line, by transcript design, to accommodate an intervening interruption.

4. Intervals within and between utterances
((pause)) - Untimed intervals heard between utterances are described within double parentheses and inserted where they occur.

5. Transcriptionist doubt
(   ) - When single parentheses are empty, no hearing could be achieved for the string of talk or item in question.

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