Embracing Students' Diverse Communicative Repertoires to Change English as a Second Language Classroom Participation Dynamics

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Student-initiated interaction is often difficult to achieve in English as a second language classes, despite its value for improving students' oral communication skills. This problem is exacerbated by English-only rhetoric, common in classrooms around the world, which demands monolingual communication or no communication at all. In contrast, students can be encouraged to draw on their diverse communicative repertoires even in English language classes with mixed first languages (L1s) when those repertoires are seen as assets. In the example analyzed in this article, a Chinese student managed to break her way into a clique of Saudi Arabian students by bringing Chinese humor into the classroom in English. The dramatic shift in participation patterns that followed this interaction demonstrates the powerful effects of encouraging students to draw on all their communicative resources, even without a common L1.

In culturally- and linguistically-diverse classrooms, in which many repertoires are encountered and exchanged, how do students interact with each other? Traditionally, English as a Second Language (ESL) learners from diverse backgrounds have been expected to use academic English as a middle ground to communicate, and code-switching—the mixing of different codes within a speech event—is often stigmatized (Hornberger, 2003). However, in classes in which teachers encourage learners to draw on their unique linguistic resources, students may feel comfortable experimenting with articulating aspects from a repertoire in their first languages (L1s) in English.

This paper will use the example of one student who found a way to incorporate a Chinese trope into an English conversation with her Saudi Arabian classmates. In doing so, I examine how classes that ease language policing by promoting students' varied repertoires as a resource rather than treating them as a hindrance hold the potential to shift participation patterns to be more student-centered. In particular, three questions will be addressed:

1. What factors cause students who are normally talkative with one another outside of the classroom to become reluctant to initiate in-class conversation with one another?
2. How do students share components of a repertoire with classmates who are unfamiliar with that repertoire?
3. How do such interactions transform classroom participation patterns?

Literature Review

In many ESL contexts, there is a widely-held belief that English should be the only language used within the four walls of the classroom—and this is sometimes even extended outside the classroom (Jordens, van den Branden, & van Gorp, 2016). This *English-only* policy, while upheld in many schools without question, stands in stark contrast to the concept of communicative repertoires, which acknowledges the multiplicity of each individual's linguistic and paralinguistic resources, viewing all the repertoires of an individual as valuable learning tools (Rymes, 2010). The communicative repertoire approach treats students' varied communicative resources as fundamentally interwoven. Just as rivers flowing from different origins coalesce and separate along their journey, repertoires interact and develop organically together. When teachers encourage their students to take advantage of all the semiotic resources at their disposal, learning opportunities are maximized (Hornberger, 2005). Further, students who do not have one hand bound behind their back by English-only rhetoric are empowered to connect with each other and build meaning (Blackledge & Creese, 2010).

Teachers have the choice to uphold such an organizational language ideology or empower students to draw on their own resources to create meaning amongst themselves. ESL instructors, especially, may feel obligated to perpetuate these institutional myths, thinking that their job is to teach correct English as defined by those in power. However, embracing students' own voices multiplies the learning opportunities to which they are exposed. Blackledge and Creese (2010) argue that such a flexible pedagogy makes "the boundaries between languages permeable" (p. 112), and teachers can support this endeavor by actively cultivating students' diverse repertoires rather than merely tolerating them.

The observations made for the purposes of this article indicate that when ESL students are unfettered by restrictions on which repertoires they may use at school, instances of voluntary classroom participation increase. This article draws on the participation pattern framework outlined by Philips (1972) for its analysis of the relationship between communicative repertoires and classroom participation. Based on her observations of students at the Warm Springs Indian Reservation, Philips outlined four common participation patterns in the classroom: teacher-to-whole class, teacher-to-student, student-to-self, and student-to-student. Philips recognized that the Warm Springs students' participation was closely linked to their culture, which was significantly different from the culture of their non-Native American teachers. Students participated more when the teacher was not involved in the interaction. I will use Philips' observations as a lens through which to analyze my own classroom dynamics.

Setting and Participants

This section examines the social and interactional contexts that frame the interactions on which this paper is centered (Rymes, 2016). The context was an ESL course at a small university located in Philadelphia. The classroom was in an old building reserved especially for English language classes, which was in a rather isolated part of the campus. It was a good 15-minute hike past the athletic fields to get to the library and the undergraduate classrooms. For this reason, some of the

ESL students complained that they felt cut off from the rest of the college students as if the university was trying to keep the foreigners away (Fieldnote 9/27/2017).

The ESL program was very small; there were just nine students divided into either an intermediate or an advanced class. This paper deals with the advanced section, in which six students are enrolled. There was one Chinese woman in her mid to late twenties, Ling.[1] There were also five Saudi Arabian men in their late teens and early twenties: Adam, Brian, Chris, Mike, and Nate. Since students must attend ESL classes for 20 hours a week to maintain their visa status, and most of the Saudi Arabian students had been in the program for a year already, they had become very familiar with each other. Ling, however, was a new student.

Although the six students also attended a reading and writing course and a film class together, the particular course I will examine in this article was called Listening and Speaking. I taught this course for 90 minutes each afternoon from Monday to Thursday. The course did not utilize a textbook but drew on themes from the morning reading and writing course, using task-based instruction to create opportunities for students to talk about the topic they had read and written about earlier that day. As it was a listening and speaking class, student participation was essential. Therefore, I arranged the desks into a circle to create a more student-centered classroom, having found that this configuration encouraged students to look at and interact with each other more than other seating arrangements. However, students rarely initiated interaction with each other during classes.

Methodology

Methods of linguistic ethnography (Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Rampton, 2006) were utilized for the purpose of this research. I acted as a participant-observer, simultaneously playing the role of teacher as well as observer. Data were compiled over the course of three months through field notes, interviews, and selected video recordings. Prior to the commencement of the research, all six students voluntarily signed a waiver giving me permission to record the classes.

As the research focuses on in-class participation, analysis of the data makes use of Goffman's (1981) production format, which sees discourse as framed by participation structures of which the interlocutors may not even be aware. Goffman's production format considers three potential roles the speaker can play: the *animator*, the one who physically produces the utterance; the *author*, or the originator of the words; and the *principal* behind the words or ideas. Considering classroom discourse from such a holistic approach will allow for an in-depth analysis. The distinction between animator and author, in particular, yields interesting results when applied to the classroom data I have collected.

The analytical framework applied to this research also includes Goffman's (1974) notion of ratified talk, which is especially salient in U.S. classroom settings in which official discourse is usually led by the teacher and conducted in academic English. Ratified participants are those who are official members of a given interaction, and this status indicates that they are allowed and expected to participate in the conversation. Conversely, unratified talk is not technically allowed to take place nor recognized as acceptable. Underlife—private speech that takes place outside the official, dominant discourse in the class—may similarly be

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[1] All names are pseudonyms.

ratified or unratified (Rymes, 2016). This paper will analyze an instance of underlife that had significant repercussions on participation patterns in subsequent classes.

Finally, Wortham's (1992) notion of participant examples provides insight into the ways discourse can be used to turn its participants into characters in a story. Participant examples "describe some actual or hypothetical event in which at least one participant takes part" (p. 196). As student-to-student interactions began increasing in frequency, so did participant examples. One participant example in particular will be analyzed, for which Wortham's idea of the duality of participants' identities is highly relevant.

Problematic Participation Structures

This section analyzes the initial classroom participation dynamics and considers potential reasons for such phenomena. At the heart of the first research question is the apparent enigma of why normally talkative students were reluctant to initiate talk in class. Observations on the issue of participation will be followed by an exploration of the factors that may feed into the problematic participation patterns.

In the first half of the semester, the participation patterns of the classroom were very teacher-dependent. My pedagogy, I realized, mostly relied on teacher-to-whole class or teacher-to-student participant structures (Philips, 1972). Although I tried to encouraged student-to-student interaction, students rarely initiated interaction with each other during classes, which I considered a serious issue for a Listening and Speaking course. Following is an excerpt from one of my earliest fieldnotes:

> Before class, during breaks and after class, the Saudi men all congregate at the circle of ten or so colorful lawn chairs in the front yard…. They smoke, chat in Arabic, and listen to music in the circle. My one Chinese student never dares to enter the circle, but I have seen her occasionally position herself tangent to the circle at one of the picnic tables nearby. She usually positions herself in socially-available locations during breaks, such as eating lunch in the dining room, which is an open space that gets quite a bit of traffic. She also likes to sit at a bench on the opposite side of [the building] from the circle of lawn chairs. I've never seen any of the men visit her during break; however, they do sometimes associate during break time in our classroom. It seems our classroom is the only place they interact, and everyone tends to speak English there, even during break time when the Saudi men talk to each other. (Fieldnote 9/27/2017)

The physical disconnect between Ling and her Saudi Arabian classmates was in a way symbolic of their interactional patterns. Indeed, physical space often has an enormous impact on the type and frequency of interactions that take place. However, shortly after these fieldnotes were taken, the use of physical space and, as a result, interaction patterns among the students changed significantly. The university removed most of the colorful lawn chairs from the front yard and relocated them to the newly-built gazebo down the hill from the ESL building. With their hangout spot gone and the weather beginning to get colder, the students began spending breaks in the kitchen of their building or on the small back porch accessible through the kitchen door if they wanted to smoke. Ling, who always brought lunch, suddenly found herself interacting with her classmates a lot more,

as they began crossing paths daily in the kitchen. Subsequently, whenever I came through the kitchen, I always saw Ling engaged in conversation with one or more of her classmates. As the students' out-of-class border talk (Rymes, 2016) increased, their in-class discourse and participant structure began to change as well.

Just like the Warm Springs students that Philips (1972) studied, my students' reluctance to talk with each other may have been related to their language socialization. In Saudi Arabia, my male students informed me, they were encouraged not to talk with women who were not related to them. One possible explanation for the lack of student-initiated communication, I posit, may be that the students, who had only been in the United States for a year, were simply not yet acclimated to the type of interaction I expected from them.

This may explain the breakdown in communication between the men and Ling but led me to wonder about the male-to-male interaction, which was just as scarce in the classroom. My male students all shared the same linguistic and cultural background. Their reluctance might have been related to the widely-held English-only belief in many ESL contexts—a policy I never invoked in my class, but which seems to perpetually hang in the air of the English language program nonetheless. For instance, the syllabus template used for the Literature 100 course for ESL students at this institution includes the following statement: "During class, you are expected to use English, even in informal conversations." Although my students did not take this course, the syllabus template shows that when language policing is propagated by upper-level administration, it can seep down into the classroom in a variety of ways, such as when documents are handed to instructors, who pass them along to their students. Many people, including myself, may feel strange speaking a second language (L2) to someone they know shares the same L1. In teacher-led conversations, the Arabic-speaking students may have spoken English to one another because they were operating under the teacher's instructions, but they may have felt uncomfortable *initiating* conversations in English with one another.

Another possibility for the lack of students-led student-to-student interaction related to Ling. Why was she reluctant to start conversations with her classmates? I suggest it may be for the same reason that I took longer to form a bond with my male students than with Ling. We focused more on our perceived differences than our commonalities, and we probably had myriad questions and uncertainties about each other. As I discuss in the following section, I got a glimpse of Ling's uncertainties in this class when I heard her inundate her Arabic-speaking peers with questions about their culture, religion, and values, to which they showed understanding, patience, and humor in their answers.

Multilingual Voices

My second research question considers how students can share items from a repertoire not familiar to their interlocutors in such a way that the items can not only be understood but also be perceived favorably so that they are willingly incorporated into the interlocutors' repertoire. In one class which I regretfully did not record, our conversation dealt with the issue of how cultural values are translated from our home countries into a new context. The interactional context was backgrounded with such questions as what do we bring with us and what

ends up changing? We talked about being adaptable and shared different points of view on assimilation. Mike brought up the topic of dating. The Saudi Arabian students explained that there was essentially no dating in their culture because men and women who were not related simply did not spend time together. Ling asked how they translate that value into their situation in America, where they meet and interact with women every day. She posed a series of questions and hypothetical situations which are reconstructed in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1. Culture, Sex, and a Broken Computer[2]
(Reconstructed dialogue from September, 2017)

1	Ling:	So can you hang out with girls here?
2	Other students:	Yeah, that's totally fine.
3	Ling:	But you can't date them.
4	Other students:	No.
5	Ling:	What if you have a female friend. Can you go to the movies and
6		have dinner together as friends?
7	Other students:	Sure.
8	Ling:	And then what if she asks you to walk her home?
9	Other students:	We'll do it.
10	Ling:	And then what if she asks you to come into her apartment?
11	Other students:	We can't do that.
12	Ling:	But what if she tells you that her computer is broken and asks
13		you to try to fix it?
14	Other students:	((laughter))

This became an ongoing joke where "fix the computer" (lines 12–13) became an innuendo, and everyone in the class, including me, incorporated it into our repertoires. What I did not initially realize, however, was that this was not just an example Ling came up with off the top of her head. When I related the story to a Chinese friend, he informed me that "fix the computer" is something akin to a joke or meme in China. Other Chinese friends I subsequently consulted also agreed. The production format in Table 1 compares my initial analysis of this phrase as an outsider to my reevaluation of the production after consulting several individuals who share more of a communicative repertoire with Ling than I do. I first believed that Ling was the author of the phrase "fix the computer"—I assumed she came up with the innuendo on her own. After consulting with Chinese friends, I discovered that the author of the joke was likely not Ling, as she had probably heard it somewhere else, added it to her repertoire, and reiterated it for our benefit. Rymes (2012) calls this phenomenon, when individuals take an item employed in other contexts and use it in a new setting, recontextualization. The principals for both situations are different—the rules governing the American college classroom compared to the rules relating to Chinese culture—but bear a fundamental similarity: Sex is something people ought not to talk about directly.

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[2] See Appendix for transcript conventions.

Table 1
Production Format (Goffman, 1981) for "Fixing the Computer"

Production format	Animator	Author	Principal
Analysis according to researcher	Ling first, then teacher & all students	Ling	The classroom, the academic nature of which frowns on direct ways of talking about sex in favor of innuendo
Analysis according to Chinese sources	Ling first, then teacher & all students	Chinese media	Chinese culture, which may, similar to this teaching context, favor indirect talk of sex over directness

As the conversation centered on the culture of all but one student, Ling found a way to bring her culture into classroom discourse by using it as a tool for communication rather than feeling the need to preface it with a phrase like "in my country, we have a saying…." Rather than emphasizing the differences by treating "fix the computer" as a Chinese saying that might not translate into English well or which her non-Chinese interlocutors might not understand, Ling introduced it seamlessly into the discussion by finding a context into which it fit. She situated it with other questions that led up to fixing the computer, so no overt explanation was needed for her listeners to understand this Chinese notion. Her choice not to label it a Chinese expression also served to ensure that all participants were ratified (Goffman, 1974).

My overhauled understanding of this student contribution is only due to luck. I casually mentioned it to a Chinese friend who recognized the expression and explained it to me. As Bakhtin (1984) insightfully notes, no words truly belong to an author. Every utterance has been used countless times before and has acquired new connotations and shed other connotations over time. Some may see Bakhtin's observation as a contradiction to Goffman's (1981) production format because pinning down an ultimate author may be impossible. However, I see Goffman's framework as a valuable tool for analyzing the nuanced nature of productions in the context in which they took place. It provides a way for researchers to peel back some of the many layers surrounding a production, as I had the pleasure of doing with the example of the broken computer.

To sum up, this section used Goffman's (1981) production format to consider the underlying processes that may have aided one student to share a part of her repertoire with her classmates. The student-initiated interaction, which was at that time still quite rare with this group, was notable because it used humor to build a bridge between very different cultures. The interesting repercussions of this single, important interaction will be discussed in the following section.

Shifting Participation Patterns

This section addresses the third research question, which explores how interactions like the one described in the previous section can transform classroom dynamics. "Fixing the computer" became one of many inside jokes that developed between students over the course of the semester and began shaping interaction patterns in the classroom. After their discussion of dating, students began using fixing the computer as a way to build rapport and bring humor into the class, and soon, much more students-led student-to-student interaction began occurring.

Fixing the computer broke down cultural and interpersonal barriers because, among other possible reasons, the students had a successful conversation using peer language instead of school language (Rymes, 2016). School language may make interpersonal relations problematic because it is often associated with formality. It may be seen as emotionless, devoid of warmth and life. Perhaps after their use of peer language was legitimatized by everyone in the class, including me, student-to-student interaction became less burdensome or intimidating and more attainable.

As a result of this shift, more student-to-student interaction began taking place both as ratified talk as well as underlife. For example, as I was helping one student finish up a categorization task, the rest of the class, who had already finished the activity, began chatting with each other. This in itself seemed incredible to me—that they chose the rather challenging task of communicating in their L2 with interlocutors of an entirely different culture and L1 rather than, perhaps, silently playing on their phones under their desk as many college students love to do. To take it a step further, rather than chatting about easy or safe topics such as the weather, the students fearlessly marched off into completely uncharted territory. Their conversation (Excerpt 2) incorporated fixing the computer into a bizarre story that they used to experiment with relationships, both fictional and real, between participants.

Excerpt 2. Husbands, Wives, and Grandmas (November, 2017)

1	Ling:	((to Nate)) Are you pregnant?
2	Multiple:	((laugher))
3	Brian:	(2.0) In what way?
4	Ling:	Adam is the wife.
5	Adam:	Adam is the wife? (1.0) Adam is the wife and Nate is the huh is
6		pregnant?
7	Ling:	Once they fixed computers yesterday.
8	Brian:	Who fixed the computer? I think Adam fixed the computer
9		because Nate is pregnant.
10	Nate:	But I'm the husband. He's the wife ((gestures to Adam))
11	Brian:	How is the husband if you are pregnant?
12	Nate:	We dunno=
13	Adam:	=Ask Ling ask Ling.=
14	Brian:	Maybe=
15	Ling:	=Yeah=
16	Brian:	=Maybe they don't know yet.
17	Ling:	This is our second mystery game
18	All:	((loud laughter))
19	Ling:	Because this is really complicated.
20	Nate:	Yeah.
21	Ling:	Yesterday Nate is fixed (0.6)

22		Nate's [computer is is in]	Adam's room
23	Mike:	[We will play a mystery game]	
24	Ling:	Yeah yeah and now	
25	Mike:	We're doctors.	
26	Ling:	Nate is the husband Adam is the wife but Nate (.) is pregnant.	
27	Adam:	But but you ask Nate to fix your computer.	
28	Mike & Nate:	No	
29	Nate:	She's the grandma.	
30	Ling:	((to Nate)) He fixed your computer.	
31	T:	((to Ling)) Oh this is your grandchild ((gestures to Nate))	
32	Nate:	Yeah.	
33	T:	Aw: congratula:tions.	

As soon as I finished helping the student, I sought to validate the other students' underlife conversation (line 31), regardless of how silly it was, because it was completely organic, sprouting from the unique repertoire of language and experiences they shared. This participant example (Wortham, 1992) transformed real participants into characters in a story. Students referenced fixing computers, the murder mystery party we had had on Halloween, and Adam's nickname for Ling, Grandma. Adam had previously used the nickname "grandma" (line 29) to categorize Ling in general terms as old because, although she was only in her mid- to late-twenties, she was the oldest in the class. However, she took that nickname and made it personal. She used Adam's nickname for her to invent a familial bond between herself and him, perhaps indicating her desire for friendship with him, which was already in the formative stage at this time and later in the semester would be fully developed. Ling also used language to essentially marry Adam and Nate, who were best friends and were always seen together. Examining the connection between this story about fictitious relationships between students and their simultaneous real-world relationships may shed light on the way students achieve desired relationships. Unlike Wortham's (1992) participant examples, which fabricated division between individuals, this participant example turned the reality of a group of students with little in common into a funny story about a family which, by the end of the semester, became, in a figurative sense, true.

The beautiful thing about this exchange was the blurring of lines of whose discourse belongs to whom (Bakhtin, 1984). Nate referred to Adam's nickname for Ling, Ling referred to the murder mystery game the teacher had planned, and Brian referred to Ling's Chinese joke about fixing computers—all within the space of about a minute or two. By blurring the roles of student and teacher, animator, author and principal, and encouraging diverse ways of thinking and expressing their communicative repertoires, educators, as well as the whole class, can tap into students' linguistic and cultural resources.

The third research question asked how interactions that draw on a variety of communicative repertoires can transform classroom participation patterns. Over the course of just one semester I had the privilege to watch the group move from infrequent and awkward student-to-student talk using academic English almost

exclusively to extended, voluntary, creative talk that was inclusive of all members and cultures.

Conclusion

These observations illustrate how teachers can actively try to make their classrooms more inclusive by not only acknowledging students' multicultural and multilingual identities but ratifying them as legitimate forms of discourse. This can be accomplished in overt ways, such as sharing the physical characteristics of our languages with one another. For instance, Ling and I now know how to write our names in Arabic, and the Saudi Arabian students know a few words for foods and locations in Mandarin, too. However, what this paper seeks to change is the way language instructors listen to the voices of their students. Rather than focusing on the capital L, that is, L1 or L2, or focusing on notions of normalcy or even correctness, it is each teacher's duty to create an environment conducive to communication, one in which everyone's voice matters. What we speak doesn't belong to a country; it belongs to us. We do not speak languages; we speak identities.

Most importantly, as this paper shows, classrooms that encourage co-presence of diverse communicative repertoires can also encourage more egalitarian interactions between students. They foster cross-cultural curiosity and understanding. As the teacher of a listening and speaking course, I had a limited amount of time to dedicate to each individual student, but when students began communicating with each other, they multiplied their speaking opportunities in the class by five. It is my hope that that confidence would also spill over into their personal lives, empowering them to interact with even more interlocutors, always remembering the one broken computer that started it all.

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Appendix

Transcription Conventions

((word))	Nonverbal action
(word)	Silence measured in seconds
(.)	Brief silence, less than a half second
=	Latching (no break/gap)
[word]	Simultaneous speech with another participant
:	Elongated sound
.	Falling intonation
?	Rising intonation
,	Continuing intonation