

# Female-male Differences in Nonnative Speaker (NNS) Verbal Interactions during Paired Writing Task Activities

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## 1 Introduction

Most research studies on female-male differences in verbal interactions have involved middle-class English-speaking Americans functioning in their L1 settings. An overview of these studies show that many have focused on differences in the *amount of talk* between females and males. James & Drakich (1993) noted that measures used to calculate participants' amount of talk have fluctuated. "[T]hese measures have included the total number of words, the total number of seconds spent talking, the number of turns at talk taken, and the average length of a turn" (James & Drakich, 1993, p. 282). They stressed that understanding female-male differences in verbal behaviour is dependent on knowing the contexts in which participants were interacting in and knowing about the performance expectations placed upon them. To this end, James and Drakich separated prior L1 studies that employed *formal* task activities, from those that used *informal* activities, and those that involved formally structured, but *non-task-oriented* activities. They defined formal task activities as "activities in which a pair or group of individuals come together to accomplish particular instrumental goals such as solving a problem together or making a joint decision" (p. 287). They contrasted this situation with informal task situations, in which participants are brought together and asked by researchers to "get to know one another", and with non-task-oriented activities, which they considered to be naturally occurring casual conversation.

## 2 Summary of relevant studies

James and Drakich (1993) identified twenty-four studies appearing from 1951 to 1991 that investigated female and male adults involved in face-to-face interaction while participating in formal task activities. Of these twenty-four studies, sixteen found that men talked more than women overall, one found that sometimes men talked more and sometimes women talked more, depending on the circumstances, one found that sometimes women, sometimes men, and sometimes neither talked more, depending on the circumstances again, and five found no differences between females and males in the amount of talk. Only one of the twenty-four studies found that women talked more than men overall.

From L2 research, Gass and Varonis (1986) tested for gender differences in the nonnative speaker-nonnative speaker (NNS/NNS) interactions of ESL dyads sharing the same L1 (Japanese). The participants consisted of ten dyads of four female/male, three female/female, and three male/male configurations. They completed three tasks: a conversation task in which the participants were free to discuss anything of interest to them, and two picture-descriptions tasks in which one participant described a picture and the other participant attempted to draw it; and then switched roles using another picture. Specifically, the researchers wanted to examine the differences between women and men in the amount each participated in the conversation and the control that each had over the direction of the conversation. The researchers observed female-male differences according to four major categories: (1) negotiation of meaning, (2) topics, (3) interpersonal phenomena, and (4) dominance.

The researchers calculated the *negotiation of meaning* by calculating the frequency of verbal exchanges initiated because of non-understandings between participant pairs during interaction. Results showed that same-sex dyads participated in the least amount of negotiation of meaning and males and females in mixed-sex dyads negotiated meaning more frequently: “[m]ales initiate more negotiation to females than they do to males, while females initiate more negotiations to males than they do to females” (Gass & Varonis,

1986, p. 330). Within the negotiations of meaning, the researchers observed differences in the use of *direct* versus *indirect* indicators of non-understanding according to gender. While overt demonstrations of non-understanding were not favoured by the participants in the mixed-sex dyads, the female to male indirect indicators of non-understanding were much greater than male to female ones.

Differences in *topic selection* during the conversation task fell along male/female lines. Male/male dyads discussed personal topics, whereas female/female and female/male dyads discussed topics that were more objective, such as future studies at university and planned return to Japan. Moreover, the female/male dyads discussed more topics than either of the other two configurations.

Gass and Varonis (1986) identified three subareas of interpersonal phenomena: *encouragement*, *apologies*, and *hedges*. They defined encouragement as “those utterances that reinforce the positive behavior of one’s interlocutor” (p. 346). The researchers defined *apologies* as phrases that functioned as attempts of mitigation by one participant against the effects of dominance by the other participant. Hedges were described as “those phrases that soften the power of an utterance, particularly when one is unsure of what one is saying” (Gass & Varonis, 1986, p. 347). The researchers found a greater frequency of encouragement utterances in the same-sex dyads than they did in the mixed-sex dyads. They explained that participants in same-sex dyads were more cooperative and more involved in the discourse than participants in the mixed-sex dyads. Apologetic phrases were evenly distributed in the same-sex and the mixed-sex dyads. However, in terms of the content of the apologetic phrases, men apologized for their English deficiencies or their drawing deficiencies, while in addition to apologizing for these kinds of deficits, women apologized for “giving incorrect information, giving insufficient information, self-correction, not understanding, taking a turn, or changing the topic” (Gass & Varonis, 1986, p. 347). Results showed that there were more hedges in the male/male dyads than in the female/female dyads. Moreover, in three of the four mixed dyads the men used more hedges than the women did, and in two of these dyads, the discrepancy was great.

The researchers also observed the number of turns taken by each participant, who led off the conversations, the overlaps (i.e., who won out in conversations when both participants began their utterances simultaneously), and the amount of talk, in order to determine if it was women or men who *dominated* conversations during interactions. Results of this analysis showed that in the free conversation task the men and women did not differ in the number of speaking turns that they took. Analysis of the picture-description task showed that the male participants dominated in leading off the conversations: “In the male/female dyads men tended to lead the conversations even when that responsibility belonged to the women by virtue of the task itself” (Gass & Varonis, 1986, p. 343). In terms of overlaps in the free conversation task, the men were usually the ones who took the conversational turns after overlaps had occurred. Finally, the researchers’ comparison of the amount of talk, *linguistic space*, during the free conversation task showed that in the same-sex dyads the amount of talk was evenly distributed between the members of each dyad. However, men dominated the amount of talk in three of the four mixed-sex dyads. Interestingly, in the dyad with the female who spoke more than the male, “... the male had in fact dominated throughout most of the conversation. It was only at the end that the female took the floor and reported on how her interest in Japanese history had been sparked” (Gass & Varonis, 1986, p. 341).

The researchers concluded that there are advantages for L2 learning when learners are combined into different kinds of paired situations. They noted that in their own study there were fewer negotiations of meaning in the same-sex dyads than in the mixed-sex dyads. The greater number of negotiations in the mixed-sex dyads, usually initiated by women, provided the participants in these dyads with more opportunities to focus on language. Gass and Varonis noted that the unequal female-male partnerships had implications for the notions of comprehensible input and comprehensible output. “Men took greater advantage of the opportunities to use the conversation in a way that allowed them to produce a greater amount of ‘comprehensible output,’ whereas women utilized the conversation to obtain a greater amount of comprehensible input” (Gass & Varonis, 1986, p. 349).

### **3 Methods**

This study was designed to seek an answer to the following research question: What is the amount of linguistic and organizational verbal interactions that occur between Thai EFL learner when they write in pairs in a writing activity? To investigate this question, a writing condition was designed in which 24 Thai undergraduate university students worked together in pairs for 80 minutes, involving planning, writing and editing an essay together. As a result, twelve argumentative essays were written in this paired-writing activity. I also collected and transcribed audiotapes of 12 80-minute verbal interactions of the participants when they worked together in pairs to write one essay per pair. The students' verbal interactions were analyzed in terms of the amount and percentages of utterances spoken in Thai and English according to gender: Female/female, female/male, and male/male.

### **4 Findings**

To measure the amount of talk, the total number of words spoken by the participants while they worked together were tabulated under the collaborative condition. The results are given in Table 1. Of the 12 dyads, five were female/female pairs, four were female/male pairs, and three were male/male pairs. As can be seen, in three of the four female/male interactions, the women spoke more than the men did, and in Dyad 4: Yustana and Thongchai, Yustana spoke considerably more than her male counterpart, at 67 percent versus 33 percent. The only female/male pair in which a male spoke more than a female, Wattana at 67 percent versus Srikamon at 33 percent, was an unusual case because of the low number of words spoken. This low number reflected the fact that Wattana and Srikamon spent only 30 out of a possible 80 minutes writing their essay together before announcing that they had completed the task.

Table 1: Number of words in verbal interaction

Female/Female	Female/Male	Male/Male
Dyad 1: Sujittra 982 / Suntareepon (W) 839 (54%) (46%)	Dyad 3: Duongpen (W) 1311 / Anu 1064 (55%) (45%)	Dyad 5: Pattana 1269 / Prateep 990 (SW) (56%) (44%)
Dyad 2: Rajinee (W) 2144 / Patoomwan 1590 (57%) (43%)	Dyad 4: Yustana (W) 848 / Thongchai 427 (67%) (33%)	Dyad 7: Patchara 1539 / Anong (W) 1147 (57%) (43%)
Dyad 8: Urai (W) 726 / Natenapa 291 (71%) (29%)	Dyad 6: Sukum (W) 454 / Anon 402 (53%) (47%)	Dyad 11: Akara 731 / Narong 592 (SW) (55%) (45%)
Dyad 9: Manee 1563 (W) / Auranong 1071 (59%) (41%)	Dyad 12: Srikamon 128 / Wattana (W) 257 (33%) (67%)	
Dyad 10: Kovit 643 (W) / Suriya 571 (53%) (47%)		

Note: (W) = the participant who wrote the essay in each dyad.  
(SW) = participants shared the writing.

Within same-sex dyads, the amount of talk was evenly distributed. Participants in each pair who spoke more usually contributed somewhere between 50 and 60 percent of the total words produced. One exception to this occurred with the two female participants in Dyad 8: Urai and Natenapa. In this dyad Urai spoke 71 percent of the total words versus Natenapa's 29 percent.

An important factor related to the distribution of the amount of talk in the dyads seems to have been whom it was that was doing the writing. For example, in the mixed-sex dyads, the three female participants who spoke more than their male counterparts were also the writers. Similarly, in the five female/female dyads, four of the five participants who spoke more than their partners were the writers as well. In the three male/male dyads, participants in two of the pairings decided to share the writing responsibility, while in the third dyad the participant who was the writer spoke less than his partner. Nonetheless, not including the two male dyads who shared the writing, in eight of the remaining ten dyads the scribe was also the person who produced a greater amount of talk.

## 5 Conclusion

The participants produced talk that varied in amount according to gender in the mixed-sex dyads, and who had and had not assumed the role of writer. I found that in three of the four mixed-sex dyads the female participants talked more than the male participants. This finding was contrary to the results provided by previous research (Gass and Varonis, 1986; James & Drakich, 1993), which showed that it is usually males who talk more than females during collaborative interaction. The amount of talk was also related to who had and had not assumed the role of scribe in each dyad. Not including the two male dyads that shared their writing, in eight out of the remaining ten dyads the scribe dominated the amount of talk. One could argue that the scribes talked more because in more cases than not they were the stronger writers in each dyad, but I suspect that a contributing factor to this difference could be that the scribes, more often than their partners, read aloud the writing as they wrote it down and read aloud the writing as they reviewed it.

## References

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