المحافظة على موضوعِ الحوار في المحادثةِ عبرَ الشّابكة

قسم اللّغة الإنكليزيّة – كلّية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانيّة – جامعة حمص

المُلخّص

تبحثُ هذه الدّراسة في استخدام متعلّمي اللّغة الإنكليزيّة كلغةٍ أجنبيّة السّوريين لاستراتيجيّاتٍ كلاميّة بهدف الإبقاء على موضوعٍ ما في غرفِ الدّردشة على الشّابكة بين الأصدقاء. ولتحقيقِ ذلك، اختيرَت أمثلة مأخوذة من لقطاتِ الشّاشة لمحادثاتٍ أجراها المشاركون في هذا البحث واستُخدِم التّحليل النّوعيّ لفهم المحادثات وتنظيمها ومنهج تحليل المحادثة لتحليلها. وأظهرت النّتائج وجود نمطٍ مُعيّن يسلُكه المتحادثون للإبقاء على موضوعٍ ما وذلك باتّباع أربع استراتيجيّات للتفاعل مع الموضوع وإبداء الاهتمام والتّعاطف. وكان من بين مخرجات هذه الدّراسة أنَّ التّواصل عبر الشّابكة عمليّة تعاونيّة يتطوّر الحوارُ فيها من خلال التّعاون بين المتحدّثين.

الكلمات المفتاحيّة: الحفاظ على موضوع الحوار، موضوع الحوار، تحليل المحادثة، الاستراتيجيّات الكلاميّة، تسلسل الأدوار.

Topic Maintenance in Online Conversation

Abstract

The present study investigates how Syrian learners of English as a foreign language apply conversational strategies to maintain topics in online chatrooms between friends. Data were extracted from screenshots received from the participants. The study employed the systematic process of Qualitative Content Analysis to comprehend and organize the data, and Conversation Analysis bottom-up approach to analyze the data. The results revealed a pattern of topic maintenance, as the interlocutors used four types of strategies to engage in the topic, express attentiveness, and show empathy. As a result, online communication is a collaborative process, in which a topical action like topic maintenance depends on both parties.

Key words: Topic maintenance, topic, Conversation Analysis, conversational strategies, sequential organizations.

1. Introduction

This study falls into the field of Conversation Analysis (henceforth, CA), which originally grew out of Ethnomethodlogy (henceforth, EM). Whereas ethnomethodologists believed that conversational interaction was something disorderly, yet governed by social order, Harvey Sacks, the founder of CA, believed that talk is a means by which speakers can achieve their communicative goals (Liddicoat, 2021). In other words, he believed that conversation was not simply disorderly, but rather following particular patterns. This belief is what led to the emergence of CA as a field of study in the1960s.

At first, conversation analysts were determined to analyze the sequential organization of talk, paying much attention to the turn-taking system, the repair mechanisms, and the various

speech acts in spontaneous face-to-face interactions. However, since social media took a huge part in people's daily lives, analysts began to explore the dynamics of online interactions, such as the sequencing of Facebook comment threads, or the analysis of Tinder video-calls. This is done by applying CA's principles to Computer-Mediated-Communication.

Likewise, this study aims to find the ways in which Syrian learners of English as a foreign language (henceforth, EFL) perform one of the key topical actions, namely topic maintenance, by applying CA's principles and sequential organizations to the data. This is part of the general *topic management* task, which includes how people initiate a topic in a conversation, maintain it, shift it, and terminate it (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). The goal is not just to identify topic maintenance, but also to check how participants make sense of the entire conversation (i.e., how the conversation unfolds). Therefore, the chats will be examined in terms of actions done-through-talk, as in *what* the participant is doing with the utterance, and *how*. Because topic management can be influenced by the relationship between the participants and the context of the conversation, it is important to mention that the study examines English online chats between friends. This

means that the language used is not formal, and the results are expected to be diverse.

This study emphasizes the role of social media by proving that online chats can be a source of valuable data for different kinds of research. Whereas audio and video recordings of face-to-face interaction require more time to transcribe the content, online chats are already in text form. In addition, the former can be stressful and embarrassing for some participants who are not confident enough to speak the language. On the other hand, online chats give them freedom and relief, as they do not feel like being tested. This creates the space for them to make all sorts of linguistic mistakes, which in turn, helps educators and university students to look into the pragmatic competence of the participants, evaluate it, and put it to practice.

2. Literature Review

Since CA has emerged from EM, the two fields have a lot in common. For example, the two share the same interest in the social order of the world, and impute this social organization to the individuals' collaboration in a local situation, not to the external social or cultural characteristics, and thus share the adoption of a bottom-up approach (Maynard and Clayman,

2003). However, because of Sacks' desire to check the analyzability of natural occurring interactions (Heritage, 1987), CA is methodologically invested in audio and video recordings, whereas EM prefers the use of ethnography and quasi-experimental demonstrations. Furthermore, when it comes to achieving the features of social setting, practices like turn-taking in CA can be both *context free* and *context sensitive*, meaning that it is only influenced by the features of specific context and can be applied to institutional settings, while EM deals with practices that do not apply to formal or trans-situational contexts.

Certainly, the interaction between CA and EM can be seen in many cases. For example, Maynard and Clayman (2003) argue that CA's focus on the marked or deviant cases in which participants deviate from the regular patterns was inspired by Garfinkel's *breaching experiments*, where he examined the participants' reactions to the breaches of social norms in order to observe common-sense. The marked cases were highly valuable, as they showed that the participants are strategic, not passive.

The investigation of sequential organization as a domain in CA and the fact that the positioning of sequences in talk is

related to social order and to the relationship of the participants both came to existence because of the collaboration between Sacks and Garfinkel in 1970 to prove that language was necessarily indexical. The two found that indexical expressions (e.g., "here" and "that") can only be understood by those using them in a shared social context, which means that they are socially organized expressions. This discovery is what led to CA's interest in sequential organizations.

One clear distinction between the two fields is the idea of *governedness* that Garfinkel found problematic. Although there are indeed hidden rules and patterns that govern the social world, not even one is steady. On the other hand, CA's investigation of the details of sequential organization as a phenomenon by itself, as well as other "marginal" details, was a reflection of how Sacks perceived conversation as an orderly organization, which was CA's main interest. According to Bjelic (2019), Schegloff's (1968) attempt to prove that phone rings and phone answers are an adjacent pair (i.e., summon-answer) that forms the opening sequence of a phone conversation, is one example of how CA studies the details. However, Garfinkel (1992) criticized Schegloff's claim, stating that the background and the directionality of phone-summons need to be considered, as they create different outcomes. He also disapproved of Schegloff's

method to collect data by asking the participants to provide audio recordings since they could not possibly record the first ring in a spontaneous manner.

Nevertheless, the sequential organizations of talk are significant to conversation analysts, since these sequences, organized through turns-at-talk, are what creates coherence. For example, an opening sequence may consist of an adjacency pair, where the first pair part requires a second pair part, and together perform the action of greeting (Schegloff, 2007). Other sequential organizations are: topic initiation, topic shifting, topic closure, topic change, topic resumption, topic maintenance, and conversational closing sequences.

Opening sequences are those that mark the opening section of a conversation and come before the introduction of the first topic. Earlier studies investigated those sequences in telephone calls. For example, Fritz (2014) stated that there is a summons-answer sequence followed by a greeting, identification or recognition, and then comes the "how-are-you" inquiry. The summons is the phone ringing, and the answer is the picking up. Schegloff (2002) was interested in the summons-answer sequence and investigated it on its own. He also introduced the idea of the *anchor position* to describe "the reason of the call"

(1986). In institutional telephone conversations, the anchor position comes right after the identification and the "how may I help you?" question, while in natural phone calls, it comes when all the opening sequences are produced, or before that in case of emergency. However, Meredith's (2014) study of opening sequences in Facebook chats between friends showed that the summons is the first message(s) sent, because it gives an aural and visual notification to get the recipient's attention, and that the anchor position comes after (i.e., in the usual state that is not an emergency). On the other hand, a recent study on Tender chats openings (Stommel & De Rijk, 2023) found that users initiate the first pair parts of the opening sequences (e.g., greeting or "how are you" inquiry), then immediately introduce the first topic without getting the second pair parts in response. In some cases, users tend to skip the opening sequences and straightforwardly introduce the first topic, which is much different to what happens in face-to-face interactions and telephone interactions.

Thus, to initiate the first topic, Schegloff (2007) mentions exchange sequences and *topic-proffering sequences*. Whereas the answer to a "how are you" inquiry may and may not lead to a follow-up question that initiates the first topic (i.e., if the answerer's response is negative), a topic-proffering sequence is

designed for that purpose. It is a yes/no question that is recipient-oriented, meaning that it seeks to claim access to a topic that is related to the recipient's experience or news. These sequences are found in a study by Button and Casey (1984), where a topic-initiating "how are you" sequence is referred to as a *topic initial elicitor*, and a topic-proffer that is specifically concerned with recipient's newsworthy events is referred to as an *itemized news inquiry*. The authors also add a third type that initiates a self-oriented new topic, referred to as *news announcement sequences*.

Topic initiation is far less tricky than stepwise topic shifting, which refers to the gradual shift to a new, related topic (Sacks, 1992). Jefferson (1984) investigated topic shifting in trouble-telling, and found that trouble-tellers tend to sum up the trouble, then move to a sub-matter, only for the recipient to stabilize it via a comment or a question. However, these steps turned out to work on a wide range of topics, according to Yang (2019). The latter also investigated the participants' manipulative strategies that enable them to introduce a new topic in such a way that makes it seem like a coincidence. The findings showed that a participant would ask a question whose answer – usually a story - creates the opportunity for that participant to introduce his/her

topic as a second story. Sometimes, a participant would initiate a telling that is usually shared in the opening section of the conversation (e.g., "what I was doing just before this conversation"), to make it suitable for the target topic to be introduced. Also, Yang mentions alluding to a particular topic that is sensitive to the teller, so he/she would use a comment that invites the recipient to ask a relevant question, in order for the teller to introduce his telling. All these strategies are what makes stepwise shifting smooth and ideal.

On the other hand, topic change (i.e., the disjunctive topic introduction) is found to be related to topic closure. Whereas stepwise topic shifting causes the previous topic to fade gradually, topic change happens when the situation calls for it, such as in *topic atrophy* or topic *exhaustion*. Basically, when a topic is on the floor for too long, participants use different types of signals that display what Jefferson (1993) calls *recipientship*. These include responses that do not add to the topic, such as minimal acknowledgement tokens, assessments, formulations of prior talk, or a summative evaluation of it. Furthermore, Howe (1991) adds repetition of previous utterances, pauses, and even laughter to these signals. Thus, these signals show that a topic change is now relevant and even necessary.

This topic change (Maynard, 1980) is usually marked with turn-initial prefaces and discourse markers, like "oh," "well," "hey," etc. According to Yang (2019), participants use "anyway" to move away from the topic, as well as "I tell you" to produce their side-telling. He also states that it can be raised in an unmarked way (i.e., no markers), in the form of an other-oriented question that indicates the departure (e.g., topic-proffers). Interestingly, the findings showed that these disjunctively raised topics are news-announcements that occur in a fixed sequential environment: after topic termination and conversation's closings. In addition, Howe (1991) imputed the introduction of unmarked topics to the application of multiple topic-closure indicators. This is because the participants agree on the fact that a disjunctive marker is no longer needed in the presence of two indicators or more.

Another case in which a topic is introduced disjunctively, yet maintains a link to the current topic, is *touched-off topics*. Yang (2019) regards it as a stepwise shift because it occurs when something is mentioned in the current topic, triggers the memory of something related or similar. Therefore, markers like "oh," "you know," "hey," "it's funny that," etc., are used to express a sense of "suddenness." Like other topic change cases, this one

seems to take place at the termination point of a topic. If the initiation of a new topic did not happen, there will be a long *interactional hiatus*, or the 'final pause' in the conversation. Yang (2019, p.110) describes it as "the unmarked form of topic atrophy," which displays the failure of the conversational collaboration between the interlocutors. But how do participants reach the point of topic atrophy?

Apparently, participants can have different intentions regarding the topic that is on the floor. If someone wants to proceed talking about something, it does not necessarily mean that the other person is enjoying it. Therefore, instances of competing over the floor are relevant. *Topic resumption* is a common strategy in these situations. In general, it is when a topic gets distracted and slightly shifted to a new direction, then resumed by halting the side-talk with a marker like "listen." Whereas Jefferson (1972) calls it *topic continuation*, Yang (2019) differentiates between the two terms, describing the latter as the production of an utterance that directly resumes the ongoing sequence, as if the side-sequence never happened. Thus, topic continuation does not halt the side-sequence, but blends with what is before it via the marker "so," "anyway," or "oh." Hedges, such as "going back to X," are also used to make the resumption smooth. It can take forms like recycling (i.e., the

entire or partial rephrasing of an utterance) or repetition (i.e., the entire or partial repetition of an utterance). Nevertheless, in a situation where the recipient is expressing boredom towards the ongoing topic (say, telling), the speaker may not pick up on those signals. This may require another attempt, in which the recipient tries to move away from the ongoing topic by producing an utterance that shifts the focus to a side-matter. If the speaker resumes his/her exhausted topic, there will be topical tension as both parties struggle to compete over the floor. Therefore, topic resumption can lead to topic atrophy.

However, when topic resumption happens in normal situations with no topical tension, it has a positive effect on the conversation. After all, it is a form of *topic maintenance*, which refers to "keeping a topic going" (Jeon, 2012). It is thus, the exact opposite of topic atrophy: when the recipient is engaging in the ongoing topic, he/she will produce different kinds of responses to keep the topic going and even develop it. According to Jeon (2012), these responses are: minimal acknowledgement tokens, topicalizers (e.g., "oh really"), *solicitous inquiries* (i.e., itemized news inquiries), and *explicit acceptance notices*, which have the same function as Schegloff's (2007) *go-ahead responses*, allowing the speaker who suggested a topic to have

the conversational floor and continue with his/her topic. These responses maintain the topic because they encourage the expansion of it. Therefore, follow-up questions are also included, since they allow the speaker to elaborate on the topic, as well as any statement that express interest in the topic. Nevertheless, it is interesting how participants differentiate between the intentions behind these responses, as they are used to signal both topic maintenance and topic exhaustion.

As in all the topical actions discussed until now, closing the entire conversation also requires collaborative efforts. The same way participants signal to each other that a topic is done for by producing a summative evaluation or an assessment, which then allows the initiation of a new topic, the closing section of the conversation is initiated after the closure of the final topic. In other words, any topic can be the final topic in a conversation, once the participants mutually decide that there is nothing more to add, so it is time to end the interaction. In telephone calls, Schegloff (2007, p. 257) states that the recipient does that "unilaterally by invoking some reason that prompts the relevance for them of closing now." This phase takes place after the summing up of the final topic, followed by an affiliative response that functions as a go-ahead response to the closing section. According to Coronel-Molina (1998), the three stages to

closing a conversation are: topic termination, recapitulation, and final closings. The recapitulation phase includes techniques like those mentioned by Schegloff (2007): signaling necessity or constraint (e.g., "I've got to go"), invocation of a future interaction, invitation or arrangement-making, in addition to topic summary, best wishes and "other shutting-down details" that appear before the final terminal exchange or the final closings. These are the farewell sequences (e.g., "goodbye"), the appreciation sequences (e.g., "thank you"), and any sequence that gets to be the last in the conversation.

3. Methodology

Because the study investigates online-mediated interactions that lack some of the verbal and non-verbal cues present in face-to-face interactions, choosing data collection methods like audio/video recordings, questionnaires, or interviews is invalid. Thus, the primary data source for this study is authentic texts, which involves gathering screenshots of actual chats between friends who use online communication applications, namely WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. This method saves me

time and effort, and makes the participants feel comfortable as they pick whatever they would like to share at their own pace. In addition, they are reassured that their privacy is preserved, as they are given the permission to choose fake nicknames (i.e., pseudonyms) and to blur out any private information in the chat.

The sample for this study consists of Syrian male and female EFL learners who are not necessarily specializing in English, but can use the language effectively in a variety of contexts. This enhances the quality and credibility of the study, which is applicable to both genders, because topic management cannot be successfully accomplished unless the participants possess excellent pragmatic competence. As for age and social background, the sample is representative of highly-active online-chat users and is not restricted to a specific social background. Thus, the participants fall within the age range of 18 and 30 years, which allows them to reflect different life experiences, making the data as inclusive as possible. Most of them were undergraduate students of different fields, whose proficiency in conversation is perfect despite the fact that English is not their major. This makes them ideal choices for the study at hand.

However, accessing the target population of Syrian EFL learners who are capable of using the language professionally is very difficult. Therefore, the study uses *snowball* sampling method, in which a small group of initial participants are chosen for the study and asked to refer additional individuals who also meet the sample criteria. In turn, the new individuals may refer other candidates, causing the sample to grow, creating the "snowball" effect.

In order to capture the conversational details necessary for the purpose of this study, Qualitative Content Analysis is used for the data organization, and CA's bottom-up approach is adopted for the data analysis process. Following the former means that the data undergo a systematic process, where the first step is to read through the content to gain complete understanding of the corpus. Next, the targeted segments are highlighted and labeled in the *coding* process, based on their function. Once the pattern is found, the data are turned into chunks, then categorized accordingly, and analyzed in detail.

4. Data

The following extracts are the transcription of the actual online chats. This means that any mistakes in the data (e.g., misspelling or grammatical mistakes) belong to the participants and were not corrected or left out for the purpose and the credibility of the research.

1. Minimal (appreciation/acknowledgement) responses that encourage the current topic:

Example (1)

Nan: My brother's girlfriend

Mira: Ok?

Nan: She had natural caramel hair that went perfectly well with her eyes

Mira: yeah?

Nan: Then she dyed it blonde, but like the grey kinda blonde

Mira: Oh no..

Nan: She literally grew 20 years older

This is an example of a telling sequence, in which Nan tells Mira about her brother's girlfriend who dyed her hair blonde and, as a result, looked twenty years older. According to Schegloff (2007), telling can take forms when it comes to the sequence organization and the turn-taking organization of it. Here, the telling is a four-turn sequence, with the mentioning of

the brother's girlfriend in the first turn, then adding two pieces of information in the next two turns, and finally the summative/evaluative comment of the telling in the last turn. In each piece of telling, the recipient responds with a minimal acknowledgement token. The first "ok?" is the go-ahead response, the second "yeah?" is a continuer, and the last "oh no" is an evaluative response that aligns with Nan's implied negative stance towards the event (Schegloff, 2007). All these acknowledgements express the listener's engagement and interest (Jeon, 2012) in the telling, inviting the teller to go on with the topic. Thus, it is an example of collaborative telling sequence.

Example (2)

Mega: Especially my little sister, I love her so much

Luz: Awww

Mega: Last time I went back home I brought her chocolate

Luz: Yes?

Mega: And taught her how to draw a peacock

In this example, Mega has been telling Luz about how much he misses his family, especially his little sister. The first turn is a statement about Mega's personal life and emotions, responded to with a lengthened "awww" that is an exaggerated feminine

expression of admiration (Zmeškalová, 2019) and so takes a positive stance towards the statement, which encourages further talk. Thus, Mega launches a storytelling sequence about how he had brought his sister chocolate and taught her how to draw a peacock. In between these two pieces of information is the continuer "yes?" that shows interest in the telling and allows the topic to be maintained.

2. Questions that show engagement with the current topic and invite topic development:

Example (3)

Pie: Because yesterday I couldn't walk.

    My right leg hurt so so bad and it made me scared.

Bee: Ouch

Bee: For no reason?

Pie: I think I have a problem with my nerve system *troubled emoji*

Pie: It's been a while now. Every time I feel pain in my arm, or back, or shoulders

Pie: And now my leg

In this example, Pie explains why he was not doing okay and introduces the topic (right leg pain). As a response, Bee's "ouch" expresses empathy and alignment with Pie's trouble-telling, then the follow-up question "for no reason?" seeks more details and

shows Bee's interest in the topic (Jeon, 2012). Only then, Pie produces three turns that elaborate on the initial turn. First answering Bee's question with what seems like a self-diagnosis and the heart of the trouble ("I think I have a problem with my nerve system"), then adding more information which is also an elaboration that reinforces the severity of the problem and expands it by mentioning previous symptoms, finally leading to his leg ("and now my leg"). Thus, the final turn is again the summative assessment of the trouble-telling. Although Bee's follow-up question takes the form of a yes/no question, Pie's answer is a three-turn elaboration, reflecting his pragmatic understanding of it as a sign of listenership and listener engagement in the telling. An example of how interlocutors deal with utterances according to their function not their shape or form, and how they contribute to the unfolding understanding of the situation.

Example (4)

Mega: I'm doing great

Mega: I'm having a French course right now but I'm writing SYE essays lol

Luz: Oh

Luz: How is it going so far?

Mega: I only wrote one, but it's good I think

In this example, the first turn ("I'm doing great") is an answer to Luz's prior "how are you" inquiry, which also serves as a topic initial elicitor, since Mega produces a second turn providing the information that although he is in the middle of a French course (and supposed to be focusing on his teacher), he is (instead) writing SYE essays. Thus, he introduces the first topic, which is met by the free-standing particle "oh" to mark information receipt (Schegloff, 2007, p. 118), followed by a follow-up question seeking more info and ultimately translates to "go on." Therefore, Mega gives a small piece of info, telling Luz that he had only written one essay, and adds an evaluation of what he thinks of it (that it is good). The use of "but" in the final turn is to emphasize the positive evaluation, in contrast with the idea of Mega's limited effort (Fraser, 2009).

3. Comments and opinions:

Example (5)

Shai: The way he was defeated..man..

Arti: For me it was the motivational speech he gave

Shai: Hell ya. Bro the whole chapter was fire

Shai: I mean when he shouted at them and they all froze

Arti: And when he first found them. it was so so smart

Shai: Yeah

Shai and Arti are discussing the latest chapter of a Japanese manga. The former mentions that not only did he like the moment where the main character got defeated, but also the manner in which he/she was defeated. The use of the ellipses and the word "man" indicates a moment of reflection or speechlessness, suggesting that the scene was so powerful and surprising. Next, Arti produces what may look like a counter response, but actually, the latter introduces his own perspective regarding the favorite part of the manga ("for me,"), and shifts the focus to another element in the chapter that they both found interesting and significant (from the fight scene to the motivational speech), which is shown in Shai's next enthusiastic agreement ("hell ya") and the statement "Bro the whole chapter was fire" expressing that he found the entire chapter to be exciting. After that, Shai provides another detail he enjoyed, to further explain why the entire chapter was excellent, using "I mean," which helps maintaining the flow of the conversation since it creates a cohesive link between Shai's prior statement and the specific detail it highlights. Arti's next turn beginning with "and," which signals continuation of topic (Fraser, 2009) in the sense that Arti agrees with Shai, and is contributing to the shared appreciation of the story plot. The final "yeah" is a

minimal token of acknowledgement and affirmation to Arti's last comment and assessment ("it was so so smart"). Thus, there is no debate or disagreement here, but a collaborative and additive discussion where each speaker's turn builds upon the previous one.

Example (6)

Lya: And he just left me there waiting for 3 hours

Mira: I would get so angry I might slap him

Lya: I knowwww that's why I couldn't handle it and remained silent for the entire date.

In this conversation, Lya was describing to Mira how her date went. She is sharing a personal experience that was upsetting (her date leaving her waiting for a long period of time), making this a complaint sequence, with an emphasis on "3 hours" to highlight the severity of the situation. Mira's turn is a preferred response to the complaint, as it is an expression of empathy by projecting how she would feel in a similar situation, while also affirming its inappropriateness. Thus, it is a strong expression of solidarity and understanding of Lya's frustration, encouraging topic continuation. Next, Lya acknowledges the empathetic response with "I knowwww" which expresses intensified agreement and shared emotional understanding, and

explains her own reaction to the situation ("that's why I.."). Thus, the preferred response allows further talk because it shows engagement and alignment with what is said.

4. Mirroring stories:

Example (7)

Lya: When I felt like I was lost, I immediately went to the gate and asked

someone for help. Thank God the man was really nice and helped me

Mira: Same thing happened when I went to get my passport. was very tiring

and everyone was smoking like ewwwww

Lya: yesss the place was so crowded there too I had to look around for a window

This is an example of a trouble-telling sequence where Lya shares a personal experience with Mira (applying for college). In the first turn, Lya talks about being lost and asking a stranger for help. Her statement "Thank God the man was really nice and helped me," expresses relief and gratitude, which indicates the disorienting situation she was in, and that sets the tone for the conversation. Relating to Lya's experience, Mira introduces a mirroring story of her being in a similar situation ("same thing happened when I went to get my passport"), which is a preferred

response because it shows the shared understanding between the speakers. Then she continues with a complaint (''was very tiring and everyone was smoking''), which emphasizes the negative aspects of the experience. The use of "ewwwww" stresses her feeling of discomfort towards the former negative aspects. Lya responds with a lengthened (strong) agreement (''yesss''), and a statement that resonates with Mira's account of the situation being repulsive, via (''the place was so crowded..I had to look around for a window''), meaning that she also felt in need of fresh air (just like Mira). To conclude, in this example, the topic is maintained through the shared experiences and the shared emotional responses that come along with them, which encourages the introduction of more details due to the sense of being understood.

Example (8)

Ham: Seriously if my family found out that I failed all 3 exams..

Ham: it will be a huge problem

Mat: Lol I once skipped an exam and got kicked out of the house and am still alive

Ham: Dude if my father finds out he will kill meee

Ham: I'm not youuu I die if I'm caught. I must do something about it

Again, in this example, Ham is sharing his personal concerns (his family finding out about his academic failure) with his

friend, Mat. The first turn starting with "seriously," and the ellipses at the end, express the gravity of the situation, and so does his second turn ("It will be a huge problem") which is a clear statement of the potential trouble. As a response, Mat introduces his own similar experience, in which the consequences (getting kicked out) were serious but not impossible to overcome. Therefore, the mirroring story here is given not only to show shared understanding, but also to lighten the mood and to comfort the initial trouble-teller. This is also indicated by the use of "lol" (the abbreviation for "laughing out loud"), and the sarcastic "am still alive." In return, Ham's next turns ("Dude if my father finds out he will kill meee") and ("I'd die if I'm caught"), are exaggerated statements (hyperbole) indicating Ham's extreme fear and distress, and the seriousness and urgency of the consequences, via the lengthened "meee" and "youuu." Whereas in the previous example the listener's response to her friend's mirroring story was that of alignment and agreement, Ham's response here ("I'm not youuu I die if I'm caught"), is either contrasting the negative outcomes of both speakers, or contrasting their capability of handling such outcomes. In both cases, mirroring stories invite further talk, which maintains topic.

5. Conclusion

The findings show that in text-based communication, EFL learners follow certain patterns when maintaining a topic. The strategies generated from the data are: acknowledgement tokens, follow-up questions, comments and opinions, as well as mirroring stories. Acknowledgement tokens like "yeah?" and "ok?" encourage further talk by expressing listenership (Jefferson, 1993), while those like "awww" and "oh no," take an emotional stance towards the topic: positive and negative. On the other hand, the turn prior to the follow-up question in the data reacts to the telling first: the "oh" expresses a change of state (Yang, 2019), and the "ouch" expresses empathy. The follow-up question invites expansion of topic because it shows the recipient's interest and desire to learn more about the topic, just like the third strategy where the recipient take role in the topic by sharing their own comments and opinions. Finally, mirroring stories invite topic expansion through expressing empathy. They are the preferred response to a complaint because they indicate mutual understanding of the tough situations. Thus, the findings proved that maintaining topic is a collaborative process that requires pragmatic and communicative efficiency.

As for future research, few areas can be suggested. For example, I mentioned earlier the fact that the influence of gender role on language use was not considered in the data analysis, although the sample included both genders. Thus, attempting research on how topic maintenance strategies vary between female participants and male participants is worth the investigation. In addition, the data did not cover a wide spectrum of contexts, nor did it cover instances of miscommunication, due to the participants' pragmatic efficiency. On top of that, visual elements such as emojis and gifs used in the chat were not considered. Thus, I suggest questions like: who is better at maintaining topics? Men or women? Do women over-maintain topic to the point of exhaustion? Are there any gender-specific strategies? What are the causes of a failed topic maintenance? Can emojis and gifs replace acknowledgement tokens?

References

Bjelić, D. (2019). "Hearability" versus "Hearership": comparing Garfinkel's and Schegloff's accounts of the summoning phone. *Human Studies*, 42(4), 695-716.

Coronel-Molina, S. M. (1998). Openings and closings in telephone conversations between native Spanish speakers. *Working Papers in Educational Linguistics, 14*(1), 49-68.

de Rijk, L. E. M., & Stommel, W. J. P. (2023). Where to start? Initiating post-match chat conversation on Tinder. https://repository.ubn.ru.nl/ handle/ 2066/298022. Retrieved on 17 July 2024.

Fraser, B. (2009). An account of discourse markers. *International Review of Pragmatics, 1*(2), 293-320.

Fritz, E. (2014). Conversation analysis openings in telephone conversations. University of Rostock, https://www.academia.edu/29716469/ Retrieved on 8 July 2024.

Garfinkel, H. (1992). Two incommensurable asymmetrically alternate technologies of social analysis. *Text in context: Contributions to ethnomethodology*, 175-206.

Garfinkel, H., and Sacks, H. (1970). "On formal structures of practical actions." pp. 337–366 in *Theoretical sociology*, ed. J. D. McKinney and E. A. Tiryakian. New York: Appleton-Century Crofts.

Heritage, J. (1987). Ethnomethodology. In A. Giddens and J. Turner (Ed). *Social Theory Today*. Cambridge, Polity Press: 224-272.

Howe, M. (1991). Collaboration on topic change in conversation. *Kansas Working Papers in Linguistics, 16*, 1-14.

Jefferson, G. (1972). Side sequences. In D. Sudnow (Ed.), *Studies in social interaction*. New York: Free Press: 294-338.

_____ (1984). On stepwise transition from talk about a trouble to inappropriately next- positioned matters. In J. M. Atkinson & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 191-222.

_____ (1993). Caveat speaker: Preliminary notes on recipient topic-shift implicature. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 26(1): 1-3.

Jeon, S. (2012). *Management of topics in online one-to-one English conversation instruction*. Newcastle University. https://theses. ncl.ac.uk/jspui/handle/10443/1503. Retrieved on 15 June 2024

Kukkar, A., Mohana, R., Sharma, A., Nayyar, A., & Shah, M. A. (2023). Improving sentiment analysis in social media by handling lengthened words. *IEEE Access, 11*, 9775-9788.

Liddicoat, A. J. (2021). *An introduction to conversation analysis*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Maynard, D. W. (1980). Placement of topic changes in conversation. *Semiotica* 30(3-4):263-290

Maynard, D. W. & Clayman, S. E. (2003). Ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. *Handbook of symbolic interactionism*, 173-202.

Meredith, J. (2014). *Chatting online: comparing spoken and online written interaction between friends* (Doctoral dissertation, Loughborough University).

Sacks, H. (1992). *Lectures on conversation* (G. Jefferson & E. A. Schegloff Eds.). Oxford, UK; Cambridge, MA.: Blackwell.

Schegloff, E. A., & Sacks, H. (1973). Opening up closings. *Semiotica*, 8 (4): 289-327

_____ (2002). Beginnings in the telephone. *Perpetual contact: Mobile communication, private talk, public performance*, 284. https://

www.researchgate.net/publication/262249754_Beginni ngs_in_the_telephone. Retrieved on 10 July 2024

_____ (2007). *Sequence organization in interaction: A primer in conversation analysis I* (Vol. 1). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Yang, Y. (2019). *The management of topics in ordinary conversation* (Doctoral dissertation, University of York).

Zmeškalová, N. (2019). Differences in expressing emotiveness in Facebook chats. https://dspace.jcu.cz/handle/20.500.14390/40170 Retrieved on 20th July, 2024.