Research paper

Overlap, Interruption and Pause in Focus Group Discussions among Tertiary Undergraduate Students

Bashir Ibrahim[1], Ain Nadzimah Abdullah[2*], Chan Swee Heng[2]

[1]*School of General Studies, Kano University of Science and Technology, Wudil, Nigeria*
[2]*Taylor's University, Malaysia*

Abstract

There has been a renewed interest in studying how turn exchanges occur among interlocutors. While overlap and interruption do occur during conversation, such occurrence is considered problematic and a breach of turn exchange protocol. This study seeks to explore how some Malaysian undergraduate students use overlap, interruption and pauses in focus group discussion. There were four distinct groups – two each from the Faculty of Engineering and the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication in a public university in Malaysia. The result shows that the subjects of this study more often use overlap to support a proposition by a previous speaker, and rarely interrupt a current speaker. In addition, the talks of most participants of this study are marked with several pauses, which render their speech to be delayed. The result suggests that acquisition of conversation practices at childhood tends to contribute to the manner of talk at adulthood. The knowledge of these speech mannerisms might help in reducing confrontations during conversation.

***Corresponding Author**: Ain Nadzimah Abdullah
Address: Taylor's University, Malaysia
Tel: (+60) 122145032   **E-mail:** *ain@upm.edu.my*

Introduction

Turn exchange protocols are believed to have been acquired during childhood when one learns not only the grammar and lexicon of the language but also the speaking habits (Scollon & Scollon 1981, Tannen 1985). Asians, generally, are said to avoid talk particularly in academic situations due to their cultural upbringing of avoidance of talk. Sato (1982), for example, reported that Asians found it embarrassing to raise their hands to answer questions in the classroom because a quick response was considered 'showing off' which their culture discourages. As for Malay children, they were taught to speak to elders only when the need be,

and that while speaking, they should not look directly into the eyes of the speaker, else they (the children) will be considered *kurang ajar* (rude) (Omar, 1992). Ali (2000) stated that 'face in Malay society is one of the mechanisms at work that enable members of society to understand the constraints governing their [Malay] discourse' (p. 15). In social encounters, for example, small talk is considered an essential element of opening a conversation. In service encounters among Malaysians, however, lack of such small talk does not appear to be important (David, Hei & DeAlwsi, 2012). These characteristics can be associated with childhood upbringing where Malay children learn the do's and don'ts of language use (Omar, 1992, p. 175). Ali (2000) argues further that:

> Preserving another's face is part of good manners and proper civilities. Those who want to save the face of another would demonstrate it, for instance, by delaying a negative reply or by not communicating negative feedback and embarrassing him. (p. 15)

The above assertions point to the influence of culture on Malay's propensity for avoidance of interrupted speech in order to avert embarrassing the conversational partner. It is, probably, this tendency of avoidance of interruption in speech which is construed by non-Malaysians to develop negative social stereotype about Malaysians as 'reserved', 'aloof' and 'solitary'. As there is paucity of research in Malaysian conversation style particularly among undergraduate students, there is the need to explore more on these conversational styles, which the use of overlap, interruption and pause are part. In conversation, interlocutors feel embarrassed after being interrupted while speaking, and the attitude tends to violate conversation protocol.

Theoretical Perspective

This study is anchored to Turn-taking Theory of Sacks, Shegloff and Jefferson (1974) which concerns with the distribution of talk in conversation including 'the sequence in which the talk is shifted from one person to another, or was retained by a single party and the way such transfer or retention were coordinated' (Sacks, Shegloff and Jefferson 1974, p. 8). They propose two components for describing turn-taking, and a set of rules.

The first component which comprises of unit-type and transition relevant place is referred to as the Turn-constructional component. Unit-type in English language, for example, includes sentential, clausal, phrasal and lexical constructions. The transition relevant place is a point where transfer of speakership is coordinated (Sacks, Shegloff and Jefferson 1974, p. 12).

The second component is the Turn-allocation component which is realized either by self-allocation or by a current speaker selecting the next speaker. They believe that in conversation the current speaker has control over who the next speaker should be. Transfer of speakership takes place when the current speaker indicates his/her willingness to relinquish the floor. Some of the signals which indicate transfer of speakership include a gaze towards the next speaker by the current speaker, tone, or pitch (Jaworski & Coupland, 1999, p. 21). Sometimes the current speaker directly calls the next speaker by his/her name or title, or directs a question to him/her (Zimmermann & West, 1996, p. 109). Where these linguistic signals or direct

nomination are indicated, the next speaker, and no one else, has the right and obligation to take over the floor from the current speaker. Otherwise, the current speaker continues.

Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's (1974) model also comprise what they call 'grossly apparent fact' about the nature of turn-taking in conversation. These facts include:

1. Speaker change recurs, or at least occurs.
2. One party talks at a time.
3. Occurrences of more than one speaker at a time are common, but brief.
4. Transitions with no gap and no overlap are common.
5. Turn order is not fixed, but varies.
6. Turn size is not fixed, but varies.
7. Length of conversation is not specified in advance.
8. What parties say is not specified in advance.
9. Relative distribution of turns is not specified in advance.
10. Number of parties can vary.
11. Talk can be continuous or discontinuous.

The above framework as proposed by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) does not prevent any participant in conversation to dominate the floor. Also, the framework does not insist on the participation of all conversation partners in the discussion. The model therefore, allows a particular speaker to dominate the conversation until he relinquishes the floor himself by nominating the next speaker or by being silent. In addition, the model recognizes the possibility of getting more than one speaker at a time, thereby the occurrence of overlap at a point where one speaker projects that the current speaker has completed his turn (Transition Relevant Place). Nevertheless, the model proposes that transition from the current speaker to the next without a gap or overlap is common in conversation.

The unit of conversation (Turn Constructional Unit/ TCU) ranges from a single word or any linguistic constituent which is not usually considered to be able to stand alone (Liddicoat, 2011, p. 84) such as *so, at, is* to complete sentences are considered as TCU. Where a speaker holds the floor for a longer period, there is the possibility that his turn consists of multiple TCUs, and as such the possibility of uneven distribution of the talk among the participants.

Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's (1974) turn-taking system account for how talk is allocated and managed during conversation. When engaged in conversation, one person speaks at a time for certain unspecified period and then relinquishes the floor for another speaker to say something. Conversation, therefore, is neither a one-party monopoly nor disorderly chunk of speech. For orderly taking of turns, conversation partners must know when it is appropriate for them to change speakership and for the next speaker to know when it is proper for him to take a turn that 'legally' belongs to him. Violation of turn-taking protocols is labelled interruption or overlap. It has to be noted that turn-taking must not be reduced to mere competition for the floor. Rather, it needs to be seen (at least in most circumstances) as a cooperative and

coordinated endeavour, in which speakers strive to achieve smooth and harmonious transitions (Ryan, 2021).

Literature Review

Various studies have been conducted on turn-taking, interruption, and overlap and pausing in cross-cultural conversations. Martinez (2018) for example, discovered that 'Spanish speakers appeared to be more inclined to produce intrusive overlaps as though they had the floor in the conversation, while the English speakers avoided interruptions in their conversations by producing shorter utterances, thus showing listenership or attentiveness' (Martinez 2018, p. 6). Her result indicates variations among conversation partners of different socio-cultural background. Similarly, Tannen (1985) who studied the conversation style of three New Yorkers of East European Jewish background, two Californians of non-Jewish background, and one native of England (with one Jewish parent) at a Thanksgiving dinner, Tannen (1985) discovers that the New Yorkers 'dominated' the conversation, and their conversation style include fast rate of speech, fast rate of turn-taking, persistence, preference for simultaneous speech and abrupt topic shifting (Tannen, 1985, p. 102). These features point at preference for non-stop conversation. Scollon (1985) believes that 'the attributions associated with slower turn exchange are virtually all negative. Slower talk, however, might not be a malfunction but part of conversational etiquette acquired early in life, and each culture has its peculiar way of bringing up the young ones. Agyekum, (2002, p. 48), for example, states that during certain conversations, the Akan children of Ghana, West Africa, may not even be in the vicinity where certain conversations are taking place, let alone participate in the conversation by talking. It is therefore not surprising to find some conversational characteristics which are believed to have been acquired early in life transferred to conversations transacted in the second language (L2).

Similarly, Trudgill (1983) reports the conversational characteristics of Athabaskan people of Canada, who engage in conversation with English speakers. The former misinterpret the attitude of the latter as rudeness, superiority and self-centeredness when they are interrupted during the conversation. The latter, on the other hand, construe the turn-taking behaviour of the former as 'surly, taciturn and withdrawn' (p. 132). Similar was reported of the Navajo people, (a Native American people of South-western United States of America), during their conversation with English speakers. The former sometimes transfer their temporal pattern of silence in turn-taking between questions and answers. This attitude resulted in the English speakers repeating their questions, while the Navajos consider this paralinguistic behaviour quite impolite, and would not wish to add to their bilingual repertory (Saville-Troike, 1985, p. 13). In intercultural communication, particularly involving Western culture 'fast talk, short pauses, and eliciting short speaking turns are viewed more positively than speaking slowly, making long pauses, and allowing the conversational partner to take long speaking turns' (Jaworski, 1993, pp. 14-15). The above examples indicate that use of pause or gaps during conversation can be associated with socio-cultural upbringing, context and situation of use. While some cultures value frequent use of pauses during conversation, others perceive such style of talk as undesirable.

Thus, the objective of this study, therefore, is to explore how some Malaysian undergraduate students use overlap, interruption and pause in focus group discussions. The study is significant in various ways. It will add to our knowledge of how turn exchanges occur among the participants of this study thereby reducing negative social stereotype about Malaysians as being monotonous during conversation due to their slow speech and use of long pauses. In addition, the study will help explain variations in social upbringing which may affect how turn exchanges occur among interlocutors.

Methodology

The methodology covers the method used in analyzing the data, the coding process followed, and the research participants and how they are coded. As the research seeks to explore the use of pausing, interruption and overlap in conversation, it is thought that conversation analysis is relevant as a method of data analysis. Various codes, however, have been used to show, for example, speaker's tune and mood. In this research, Drew and Heritage (1992) transcription notations were used because they are thought to be recent transcription notations. In order to identify the participants, each speaker was given a unique code that would identify him/her from other speakers.

Method of Data Analysis: Conversation Analysis

The analyses of the two activities conducted by the participants were done using Conversation Analysis (CA) as analytical tool. Principally, CA seeks 'to discover how participants understand and respond to one another in their turns at talk, with a central focus being on how sequences of interaction are generated' (Jaworski & Coupland 1999, p. 19). Through the two academic activities, participants' exchanges of turns were generated.

The use of CA in this study to analyze the data was done by identifying the participants' involvement in the conversation, how speaker changes occurred between them, and identification of interruption, overlap and pause. For example, whether speaker change occurred at the appropriate place (Transition Relevant Place) or at a point where change of speakership was not expected (overlap/interruption). CA also helped in explaining the structure of the talk, such as on how the current speech was related to the one preceding it, and finding out whether there was any problem in the structure of the talk and how the participants tried to repair the perceived problem in the talk and who did the repairs.

The Coding Process

In this study, Drew and Heritage (1992) transcription notations were used as described below:

Left square bracket ([ ): Starting point of overlapping speech.

Right square bracket ( ]): End point of overlapping speech

Number(s) enclosed in brackets (e.g. 2.4): Silence measured in seconds

A single dot enclosed in brackets e.g. (.): Pause of less than 0.2 seconds

Upward arrow (↑): Upward shift in pitch

Downward arrow (↓): Downward shift in pitch

Underlined word/phrase: Word/phrase emphasis

Colon (:) within a word: Prolongation of sound

Degree sign (°) at the beginning and end of a word: Section of talk produced in lower volume than the surrounding talk

Capital letters: Section of talk produced in higher volume than the surrounding talk

Hash symbol (#): Creaky voice

Pound Sterling symbol (£): Smile voice

Letter 'h' within a word (h): Laugh particle inserted within a word

A dash (-) after incomplete word: Speech cut off in the middle of a word

Less than symbol (<): Abruptly completed word

Greater/less than symbol (> -- <) at the beginning and end of a word: Section of talk uttered in a quicker pace than the surrounding talk

Less/greater than symbol (< -- >) at the beginning and end of a word: Section of talk uttered in a slower pace than the surrounding talk

Phrase/sentence enclosed in brackets (---): Section of talk that is difficult to hear but is likely as transcribed

Blank square brackets ( ): Inaudible word

A dot and three 'h' (.hhh): Inhalation

Three 'h' (hhh): Exhalation

A dot at the end of a sentence (.): Falling intonation at the end of an utterance

A question mark (?): Raising intonation at the end of an utterance

A comma (,) at the end of a sentence: Flat intonation at the end of an utterance

Equal sign (=) at the end and/or beginning of a word: 'Rush through' without the normal gap into a new utterance.

Comments in double brackets ((----)): Transcriber's comments

Research Participants

There were 17 undergraduate students whose age ranges from 18 to 25. They were divided into four groups – two from the Department of Engineering and the other two from the Department of English. The participants from the respective departments were from the same year and taking the same course. From the Department of English, there were five participants in Group 1, and four in Group 2. While from the Department of Engineering, there were four participants in each of the two groups. The participants were coded as follows:

Table 1: *Participant's coding*

English Group 1		English Group 2	
Activity 1	**Activity 2**	**Activity 1**	**Activity 2**
P1(First speaker)	PA1 (First speaker)	PP1 (First speaker)	PB1 (First speaker)
P2(Second speaker)	PA2(Second speaker)	PP2 (Second speaker)	PB2 (Second speaker)
P3 (Third speaker)	PA3 (Third speaker)	PP3 (Third speaker)	PB3 (Third speaker)
P4 (Fourth speaker)	PA4(Fourth speaker)	PP4 (Fourth speaker)	PB4 (Fourth speaker)
P5 (Fifth speaker)	PA5 (Fifth speaker)		

Engineering Group 1		Engineering Group 2	
Activity 1	Activity 2	Activity 1	Activity 2
S1 (First speaker)	SS1 (First speaker)	SA1 (First speaker)	SB1 (First speaker)
S2 (Second speaker)	SS2 (Second speaker)	SA (Second speaker)	SB2 (Second speaker)
S3 (Third speaker)	SS3 (Third speaker)	SA3 (Third speaker)	SB3 (Third speaker)
S4 (Fourth speaker)	SS4 (Fourth speaker)	SA4 (Fourth speaker)	SB4 (Fourth speaker)

Results and Discussion

The Use of Overlap, Interruption and Pauses

The use of overlap, interruption and pauses has been observed this study particularly where the next speaker assumes that the current speaker has finished his/her turn, and that he/she has the right to talk, and there is the possibility of the occurrence of overlap. In cases where the overlap was to support the current speaker or at a point speaker change was projected, the overlap is considered 'unproblematic overlap'. Whereas, 'problematic overlap' often referred to as interruption, occurs at a point where change of speakership was not projected.

The Use of Overlap

According to Lee (2020), in overlapping talk, another speaker starts up a next turn while a prior speaker is still talking. Schegloff (2000) argues that it is very common for two speakers to talk at the same time during conversation involving multiple participants. The tendency, however, appears to be a departure from what is basically known in conversation as one-speaker-at-a-time protocol. Much of what has been stated about one-speaker-at-a-time feature of conversation depends largely on the culture being studied, the situation, context, participants involved and genre. Trudgill (1974, p. 131), for example, reported that '[in] some Caribbean communities, as amongst certain groups of Black American adolescents, it is perfectly normal, at least in some situations, for everyone to talk at once'. Also, according to Berger (2011, p.293) there are a lot of overlaps and interruptions in political debates.

The use of overlap in this study follows Sacks, Shegloff and Jefferson's (1974) turn-taking system of one-person-at-a-time protocol. Minimum occurrences of overlaps have been observed in this study. This means that a speaker is allowed to retain the floor until he/she nominates the next speaker or he/she relinquishes the floor by him-/herself. However, this is not to say that there were no occurrences of overlapping speech here. Some instances of overlaps include the following:

7 S2: <Free access to the internet>
8 First what I think is (0.5) er (0.6)
9 ONE should get free access to the internet (0.8) but
10 wait (.) wait (.) first (0.7)
11 let me get this clear↓
12 Free access >you mean free the internet
13 that you don't have to pa::y<↑
14 =or <u>free all the websites</u> so that they can go a::nd[
15 S3: [It means

16   no block of the websites (0.9)
17   S2: Okay (0.5) no block of the websites (0.5)
18   £not££pay££free£=

S3 overlapping talk in lines 15-16 did not seem to be a problematic overlap because S2 seemed to accept S3's contribution with delight and even uttered something while smiling (line 18) that free internet did 'not mean pay free'. Overlapping talk, therefore, is 'an interactional phenomenon which is produced by the speakers together' (Liddicoat. 2011, p. 113-114). It appears as a natural interjection in seeking clarification. Unlike interruption (problematic overlap), unproblematic overlap is mostly non-confrontational. Another instance of non-confrontational overlap is shown in lines 39 - 51 below:

39   PP1: Okay (.) ə:m (0.4)
40   May be I can start with (0.2) the (.) most (.)
41   =common one↓ (0.5) which is the (0.2) ə:m (1.2) exposure
42   =>to pornographic sites< (1.1) Okay (1.4)
43   This one is very serious↑ In my point of view↑
44   =pornographic sites should be::: [BANNED
45   PP3:   [Banned
46   (2.1)
47   PP1 ((continues)): And should be restricted
48   =at all costs (1.2) especially to those people
49   =who're (0.9) you know (0.5) very young[
50   PP2:   [At early age
51   PP1: Yeah (0.4) at early age

At the end of PP1 TCU in line 44, PP3 repeats the word 'banned' in line 45. The repetition might be to emphasize what PP1 said or to support her idea that all 'pornographic sites should be banned'. Similar interruption occurred in line 50 where PP2 rephrased 'very young' to 'at early age'. PP1 seemed to accept the contribution of PP2 in line 51 by saying 'yeah, at early age'. The occurrences of the interruptions seemed to be unproblematic because they were meant to support a point by contributing to a more precise term that can be used, and it was very brief and hardly intrusive. The overlap also occurred in a group where the members claimed that they were close friends who were very much conversant with each other. Comparatively, this particular group has more occurrences of overlapping speech than the other groups. In other words, it could be said that overlaps could occur more frequently among friends.

Interruption in this study does not only occur during an argument but also to add a point to what the current speaker is saying. In this case the interruption serves the function of unproblematic overlap as the following extract indicates:

264 P2: Alright (0.7) ə:m (0.5) on your question just now↓
265 I personally think that ə:m (0.4)
266 not everyone WOULD ə:m automatically (0.5) go:: on   goo:gle

267 =and search for violence.
268 But (0.6) however (0.6) er (.)like my friend said
269 =that (.) there're advertisements↓.
270 Even though (0.4) they did not <u>think of it</u> (0.3)
271 if they see it (0.3) they'd be triggered[
272 P4:   ]They want to know
273
274 ((Interruption))
275
276 P2 ((continues)): Their curiosity will (0.2) lead them ↓
277 So (0.3) to me (0.4) the freedom of expression
278 =cannot be:: ə:m should not be:: (0.5) too:: wide
279 =cannot be °too broad° because
280 =>being liberal is a good thing<
281 but (0.6) if <u>things</u> get out of control (0.5)
282 or (.) it AFFECTS youngsters↓
283 =regardless of age or religion (0.8)
284 it'll be a BAD THING↓

In line 274, P4 interrupted P2 in order to add a point, and not to challenge what P2 was saying. P4 interrupted P2 seemingly to add to what she (P2) was saying. The interruption, therefore, might not be considered problematic because it was not meant to dispute a point even though it was made at a point where exchange of speakership was not expected.

In some other groups, substantial data in this research on TCU and TRP indicate 'smooth transition' from the current speaker to the next one. The transitions are considered smooth because there are very minimal problematic overlaps. This probably shows that there was minimum use of overlap among the participants of this study.

It is noted, however, that there were some latches in the speeches of the participants. When speech latched onto another, it does not indicate that interruption has taken place. As the next speaker latched his/her speech into the current speaker's, the short silence expected at TRP is not present, and the tendency of exchange of speakership occurs. In this case, the assumption that silence tends to occur at TRP did not happen as expected. Some data from this study indicated that there was exchange of speakership without a silent pause, as in lines 150 to 158 in the following extract:

150 PP4: Ah (0.4) for my opinion (0.9) there's a little
151 =violence in () (0.5) for example↑ ()
152   (chasing the ())[
153 PP3:[That's the trailer↑
154 =So (0.8) we cannot mix that]↑=
155 PP2: [=Yeah that's the climax]=
156 PP4: =<That's why I say is only a little violence>

157 It has many levels.
158

From lines 153 to 156, the speeches of PP3, PP2 and PP4 latched into one another with no apparent silence occurring between their speeches. The finding of this study seems to contradict what Al-Harahsheh postulates that it is impossible to take over a turn without a gap (Al-Harahsheh 2012, p. 12). Also, as conversation partners usually abhor silence, it is possible for conversation partners to try to reduce transition space, as the following extract also indicates:

234 S3: ((continues)) No (.) It's just
235 =like you realize[
236 S2:   [Promotes (.) that means
237 =you're making everyone
238 =to talk bad like of their[
239 S3:   [Then they realize this's wrong]=
240 S2: =Yeah (.) >because everyone is giving
241 =a negative comment which will be ()<=
242 S3: =Actually this case like er (0.6)
243 pouring hot water on animals (0.3)
244 I mean this's horrendous (0.3) right↑
245 Actually (0.5) () right↑
246 there're many case happening every day (0.5) right↑
247 But then only one video↑ that has promote (0.8)
248 I mean (.) the spread o::f (0.3) er (0.4) [] animals
249 =that caused HUGE response >on the social media< (.)
250 So (.) if you try to say er (0.4)
251 that (.) that ONE particular video
252 =that promote the violence
253 =but in contrast you need to see also
254 THAT video that'll (0.6) how will I say (0.8)
255 that'll trigger (3.4) that'll trigger::

In the above extract, there was no transition space between S2 and S3 (lines 235 & 236, lines 239 & 240). S3, however, might have latched his speech into S2's for a purpose – to take over the floor from S3 which he succeeded (line 242) in doing. Nevertheless, not all overlaps are considered unproblematic. The following extract shows confrontational overlap:

49 SS1: Well (0.5) is actually like THIS↓ (0.4)
50 Most of these regions (0.7)
51 °we'll take countries in the regions°↓
52 (0.4) most of these COUNTRIES in this REGION
53 =are (0.5) actually (0.3) very unstable countries↓ (0.4)
54 which they won't have strong governments↓
55 =which (.) >causing them have rebels VERY VERY frequent<
56 (.) and then (0.6) the worse thing is (0.4) most of
57 =their subordinates (.) or their CITIZENS

58 very easy to achieve (0.4) or GET °any weapons°
59 <Very very easy to get (0.3) so>[
60 SS3: [What makes it unstable]
61
62 (2.7)
63
64 SS1: <The governments are weak>=

SS3 interrupted S1 (line 60) to ask 'what makes unstable countries unstable'. What followed was a silence of 2.7 seconds (line 62) before S1 was able to answer the question. The silence of S1 seems to indicate that she was not expecting the question at that time, and that the overlap was a challenge to her (S1). In cases where overlap appears to be a challenge, then it can be termed an interruption.

The Use of Interruption

Often, interruption is termed problematic overlap, which indicates that something additional is happening in the conversation (Liddicoat, 2011, p. 80), such as trying to display power and dominance (Lestary, Krismanti & Hermaniar, 2017). Sometimes, for example, interruption can occur if the person who interrupted the current speaker wants to dispute what has been said. According to Stenström (1994), the beginning of an utterance can indicate whether the speaker taking a turn 'agrees to, doubts or objects to what the previous speaker have said (p. 69). Words like 'but', 'however' and 'no' tend to indicate disagreement. There are a number of studies that have been conducted on interruption (e.g. Clarke 1993, Gunnarson 1997, Menz & Roubale 2008, all cited in Tannen 2012). Gunnarson, for example, studied patterns of interruption among postgraduate students from three different disciplines in a Swedish university. She discovered that men interrupt females more often, and that women interrupt neither males nor females.

Interestingly, in this study, only one group comprised of only female participants. In the other three groups, there were equal numbers of males and females, at a ratio of 2:2. It was observed that more interruptions occurred in the third group comprising two Chinese-Malaysians, one Indian-Malaysian and one Malay speaker of English. Generally, however, in this study, interruption was minimally used. Some occurrences of interruption in this study are discussed in the following extract:

484 S4: °I know you can go to setting (0.3) and°=
485 S3: =Have tried on youtube=
486 S4: =Yes[
487 S1:   [°He did before°]=
488 S3: =Yeah (0.4) I did before (0.9)
489 Because that's why (.) I know (0.4) i:::f (0.6)
490 >how the youtube know you're above 18
491 (.) >or below 18 is based on the account you<[
492 S2:   [That's why we

493 need ()[
494 S3:   [Impossible (0.3) lah=
495 S2: =Why impossible while we have
496 =lots of possibilities=

In the above extract, the participants were having a heated argument on the restriction of internet access. Their speech either latched into or overlapped with one another. In line 494, the use of the word 'impossible' by S3, and subsequent question by S2 (line 495) indicated disagreement with one another. A similar scenario was also observed in another extract from the same group as depicted in the following extract:

520 S2:[then you want them [to
521 S3:[So (0.3) in
522 =another way (0.5) in another way (0.7)
523 you want the youtube to u::se (0.5)
524 <u>identification card</u> (0.7) >to insert
525 =the identification card<
526 =so that you can open (0.3) er (0.5) one account↓=
527 S2: =GOOD (.) >That's good idea< (0.4)
528 °We need to do that°=
529 S3: =Oh (.) that means (0.3) every computer (0.7)
530 <u>should have the identification card</u> (0.5) insert (0.6) right↑

The word 'then' (line 520) and also 'so' (lines 521 & 526) seem to indicate problematic overlap and therefore can be considered confrontational because each of the participants stayed resolute to their stand. The underlined phrases 'identification card' in line 524, and 'should have the identification card' in line 530 show emphasis by S3 who seemed to doubt the possibility of using identification card to open an account in order to have access to some websites.

The Use of Pause

Frequent use of pauses is sometimes associated with lack of fluency. According to van Os, de Jong & Bosker (2020, p. 1188) 'speech without pauses was rated more fluent than speech with pauses either between or within clauses'. Pauses, however, are sometimes regarded as Conversational style of Malaysians, whose conversation is characterized by short messages, and quiet and short accent (Jassem, 1994, p. 62). This tendency of Malay speakers to use short messages, adhere to turn-taking protocols – one speaker at a time – has been observed in this study. It has been observed also that, in all the groups, many participants paused frequently, sometimes separating each word with a pause of as long as 1.5 seconds or even longer. Despite these long pauses, the conversation partners did not consider the gap as an opportunity for them to take over the floor from the current speaker. As has been highlighted in the literature, knowledge of when the next speaker possesses the right to take over the floor can be purely a cultural one (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain 2000, p. 173). Among English speakers, a gap of 1.0 seconds can be considered as TRP (Jefferson 1989 as cited in Nakane 2003, p. 83). In this

study, however, conversation partners did not consider pauses of 1.0 second or even more as a transition relevant place – a place where change of speakership occurred - probably because of the nature of Malay conversation style that is characterized by long pauses and frequent gaps (Jassem, 1994).

In this study, frequent pauses have been observed during the speech of almost all participants or after the next speaker has been selected before he/she takes over the floor. Selection of the next speaker can be done either by direct nomination, gazing towards the next speaker, directing a question to him/her, or change of tone or pitch of the current speaker (Jaworski & Coupland, 1999, Zimmermann & West, 1996). After the nomination of the next speaker, a pause is possible before he/she takes over the floor, as the following extract indicates:

435 SA1: °You can take it° (0.4)
436 BUT we say that (0.7) the internet provider
437 =>must think about it< (2.1)
438 We just like (0.7) just like ()
439
440 (3.3)
441
442 SA2 ((talking to SA4)): [xx] you like to add something else↓
443
444 (3.6)
445
446 SA1: Do you want to add something↓
447
448 (2.2)
449
450 SA4: Ah (.)no (.)
451
452 (1.7)
453
454 SA2: How about (0.5) er (0.4) the:: (0.2) case (0.2)
455 when you RESTRICT >the internet access for students<
456 does it really::: (0.9) ə:::m (2.4) what do you:: (0.7)
457 >does it really affect the:: (0.6) freedom of the students<
458 =to express themselves (0.2)
459 do you think↑
460 °is it right or wrong°↓
461
462 (3.4)
463
464 SA3: °I think is good°

In line 442, SA2 called SA4 by name and asked whether she wanted to add something. However, there was a pause of 3.6 seconds (line 444) which made SA1 repeat the question asked by SA2 in line 446. Despite the repetition of the question there was another pause of 2.2 seconds (line 448). According to Stenström (1994), the beginning of an utterance can indicate whether the speaker taking a turn 'agrees to, doubts or objects to what the previous speaker said (p. 69). In an attempt to take the turn, the next speaker uses some signals such as filled pauses *(əm, ə:m)* and verbal fillers *(well, I mean, you know)* (Stenström 1994, p. 71) to indicate his/her willingness to take over the floor. Such signal, however, tends to indicate that the next speaker is willing to take over the floor but was not fully prepared. The verbal filler 'ah' at the beginning of line 450 used by SA4 indicated that he was not fully prepared for the floor, and therefore rejected the offer of both SA2 and SA1 (line 450). Even though the offer to take over the floor was rejected by SA4, the conversation had to continue. So, in line 454, SA2 continued but with a shift of the topic from the case of the internet provider to freedom of expression. SA2 adopted a repair mechanism to the conversation which seemed to break after SA4 rejected an offer to take over the floor.

Sometimes in this study, pauses appear after what can be called rhetorical questions – questions that are not directed to any conversation partner, or the question which requires no answer because the answer is thought to be known such as in the following extract:

561 S2: To be an easy way (0.8)
562 why don't we JUST BLOCK ALL the websites↓
563 =No one watch anything=
564 S3: =CANNOT (1.1)Cannot do so=
565 S4: =Why (.) why not=
566 S3: What i::f (0.9)
567 You think of the consequences
568 =if a::ll (0.7) the websites
569 =>the pornographic sites ARE BLOCKED<
570 (0.6) >then what's the consequences<
571
572 (2.2)
573
574 S2: What (0.4) °What do you mean by that°
575
576 (1.3)
577
578 S3: Okay (0.3)look (.) now (0.4) >I'll tell you what<
579 (0.8) you're creating a ONE (.) HUGE (.)
580 WHOLE (world) chaotic (0.3) you know (1.5)
581 >Just like creating more CRIMINALS in the world<
582 =£if££you££try££to£[
583 S4:   [That's very () (0.6) because curiosity=
584 S3: =YES (0.5) £because££based££on££the£ curiosity£

585 (0.8) <u>if the site is BLOCKED</u>(.)
586 =<u>all those websites are BLOCKED</u> (.)
587 and then you (tendered) the curiosity↑
588 =then <u>what the man WILL DO</u>↓
589 =<u>and what the woman WILL DO</u>↓
590
591 (2.4)
592
593 S1: Do what↑
594
595 S3: Do WHAT↑(0.3) Do WHAT↑(0.5)
596 >As I click on the website< (.)
597 >the pornographic site< (.)
598 >the violence website< (0.8)
599 Now if some people they like to see the (0.7)
600 like home video (0.5) like some (.) action movie (.) right↑
601 =<u>If you BLOCK that kind of video</u>(0.3)
602 and then (0.4) based on their curiosity
603 =<they'll do it in real>

S2 proposed an idea in lines 561-563 that all websites should be blocked so that nobody watches anything again. He stressed the phrase 'just block all' which was transcribed in capital letters to show the emphasis in his speech. At the end of line 563, just after the word anything, S3 came into the conversation to express the impossibility of blocking all websites. Immediately after the word 'cannot' was expressed by S3, S4 came in to ask why. When responding to the question, S3 talked at a quicker pace in lines 568-569 probably to defend his stand on allowing all websites, including the pornographic sites to continue their operation.

The pause of 2.2 seconds that followed (line 572) after the TCU 'then what's the consequences', and line 591 after the TCU 'and what the woman will do' seemed not to require any answer because the questions are made to make a point rather than receiving a response. Some pauses that come after rhetorical questions in this study indicated that the speaker was either emphasizing or making a point. The type of pause, therefore, can be termed 'rhetorical pause' (Enninger, 1987, p. 270) which can appear not as a point of transfer of speakership (TRP) but as a continuation of the initial TCU. The question in line 595, however, seemed to be used by the speaker (S3) as a mental preparation to answer S1. The underlined clauses in lines 585, 586, 589 and 601 indicated emphasis by the speaker.

Conclusion

In this study, an attempt had been made to explore the use of overlap, interruption and pause in focus group discussions among Malaysian undergraduate students. The study discovered that the use of both overlap and interruption was negligible among the participants probably due to the norm of conversation protocol they acquired during childhood which seem to

discourage the use of interruption and overlap during conversation. Not only that the participants of this study minimally used overlap and interruption, their speech was marked by several pauses which renders their speech very slow. The study has gone in some way towards enhancing our understanding of conversational style of the participants of this study in particular and most likely of Malaysian undergraduate students. Further studies however are required to explore whether task type/topic or educational level play any role in the use of overlap and interruption in conversation among Malaysians, and whether frequent use of pause is a significant feature of Malaysian conversation style.

Limitation of the Research

This research is limited to overlap, interruption and pauses among the participants of this study. The aspects selected for this study are part of turn-taking exchanges which also covers a lot of aspects such as turn allocation, turn construction and turn distribution. Each of these aspects can be a stand-alone area which requires a separate treatise. Conversation, therefore, exhibits a very wide range of styles, nuances of meaning, and linguistic strategies. Variation in conversational styles can be a source of discord resulting in the difficulty for negotiation of turns in interaction.

Implication and Suggestion for Future Studies

Malaysians have been said to be slow talkers (Jassem 1994), and observe turn-taking protocols so as to save the face of conversation partner. As student talk is considered more valuable in language learning, following turn-taking protocols might not be desirable particularly in countries that value students talk more. In other countries, however, teacher talk is considered the norm of teaching and learning. Studying student's conversation styles, therefore, will help teachers and lectures understand the nature of students they are dealing with, thereby helping the former select appropriate content for teaching the latter.

In addition, in this study it has been discovered that the speech of the participants was marked by various pauses sometimes as long as 5 seconds or even more, and the participants scarcely use overlap and interruption during conversation except when someone tries to support what the current speaker was saying. The nature of the overlap and interruption was therefore non-confrontational and unproblematic. The finding implies that the participants of this study, and probably Malaysian undergraduate students, have learnt to follow turn-taking protocols of one speaker at a time, thereby avoiding possible confrontations that may arise as a result of overlapping talk or interruption during conversation, and at the same time save the face of conversation partner. The study would help reduce negative social stereotype about Malaysians of being monotonous speakers due their tendency of using long pauses during conversation.

Future studies might be required to ascertain whether task type engaged by participants plays a role in their use of pauses, interruption and overlap. During political debates, for example, Berger (2011) discovered that there was a lot of interruption and overlap. Future studies may, therefore, consider using debate as a task type to see whether Malaysian participants use much interruption and overlapping speech. In addition, Malaysian and non-

Malaysians might be compared so as to confirm which among the participants use interruption and/or overlapping talk more often.

References

Agyekum, K. (2002). The communicative role of silence in Akan. *Pragmatics*, *12*(1), 31-32.

AL-Harahsheh, A. M. A. (2012). *The perception and practice of silence in Australian and Jordanian societies: A socio-pragmatic study*(Unpublished doctoral thesis). Edith Cowan University, Western Australia, Perth.

Ali, J.M. (2000). *Verbal Communication: A study of Malaysian speakers.* Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: University of Malaya Press

Berger, I. (2011). Support and evidence for considering local contingencies in studying and transcribing silence in conversation. *Pragmatics*, *21*(3), 291-306.

Celce-Murcia, M & Olshtain, E (2000). *Discourse and Context in Language Teaching.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

David, M. K., Hei, K. C., & DeAlwis, C. (2012). Politeness Strategies in Openings and Closings of Service Encounters in Two Malaysian Agencies. *SEARCH: The Journal of the South East Asia Research centre for Communication and Humanities*, 61.

Drew & Heritage (eds). (1992). Conversation Analysis. In Drew & Heritage (eds). *Talk at Work.* Cambridge: CUP

Jassem, Z.A. (1994). *Malaysian English: A sociolinguistic and TESL/TEFL Perspective.* Malaysia: Pustaka Antara

Jaworski, A. (1993). *The power of silence.* Newbury Park, London: Sage Publications

Jaworski, A., & Coupland, N., (1999). Perspective on discourse analysis. In Jaworski, A., & Coupland, N., (Eds.). *The Discourse Reader.* London: Routledge.

Lee, K. (2020). Why Do We Overlap Each Other?: Collaborative Overlapping Talk in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) Communication. *Korean Journal of English Language and Linguistics*, *20*, 613-641.

Lestary, A., Krismanti, N., & Hermaniar, Y. (2018). Interruptions and silences in conversations: a Turn-Taking analysis. *PAROLE: Journal of Linguistics and Education*, *7*(2), 53-64.

Liddicoat, A.J. (2011). *An Introduction to Conversation Analysis.* New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Martinez, C. B. (2018). Cross-cultural analysis of turn-taking practices in English and Spanish conversations. *Vernacular: New Connections in Language, Literature, & Culture*, *3*(1), 5.

Nakane, I. (2003). *Silence in Japanese-Australian Classroom Interaction: Perceptions and Performance.* (Unpublished PhD thesis). University of Sydney

Omar, A.H. (1992). *The Linguistic Scenery in Malaysia.* Petaling Jaya: Jiwamas Printer Sdn. Bhd.

Ryan, J., & Forrest, L. (2021). 'No chance to speak': developing a pedagogical response to turn-taking problems. *Innovation in language learning and teaching*, *15*(2), 103-116.

Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. A., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language*, 696-735.

Sato, C. (1982). In Hines, M., & Rutherford, W. (Eds.). (1982). *On TESOL'81.* Teachers of English to Speakers of other languages.

Schegloff, E. A. (2000). Overlapping talk and the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language in society*, *29*(1), 1-63.

Scollon, R. (1985). 'The Machine Stops: Silence in the Metaphor of Malfunction'. In D. Tannen, & M. Saville-Trioke, (Eds.), *Perspective on Silence*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Scollon, R., &Scollon, S. B. (1981). *Narrative, literacy, and face in interethnic communication* (Vol. 7). Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Stenström, A., (1994). *An introduction to Spoken Interaction.* London: Longman.

Saville-Troike, M. (1985). 'The Place of Silence in an Integrated Theory of Communication'. In Tannen, D. & Saville-Troike, M. (ed) (1985). *Perspective on Silence.* Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Tannen, D. (2012). 'Turn-taking and Intercultural Discourse and Communication'. In Paulston, C.B, Kiesling, S.F., & Rangel, E.S. (Eds)., *The Handbook of Intercultural Discourse and Communication.* UK: Wiley-Blackwell pp. 135-157

Tannen, D. (1985). Silence: Anything but. In D. Tannen, & M. Saville-Trioke, (Eds.), *Perspective on Silence.* Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Trudgill, P. (1974). *Sociolinguistics: An introduction to language and society.* Middlesex, England: Penguin books

Van Os, M., De Jong, N. H., & Bosker, H. R. (2020). Fluency in dialogue: Turn-taking behavior shapes perceived fluency in native and nonnative speech. *Language Learning*, *70*(4), 1183-1217.

Zimmermann, D. H., & West, C. (1996). Sex roles, interruptions and silences in conversation. *Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science Series* 4, 211-236.