Topic Management in Email Exchanges Between Non-native Speakers of English

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The present paper aims at exploring how topics are developed and sustained in email exchanges between non-native English speakers. As communication via email is two-way although asynchronous, questions were raised as to (i) whether NNS speakers also cooperate with each other to communicate topically via email, (ii) what kind of strategies and linguistic devices are used for their topic management, and (iii) how learners’ effort to communicate topically affects the overall structure of email texts. A topic-based analysis was conducted on weekly exchanges between Korean and Chinese university EFL learners who participated in a global key-pal project. The results showed that the NNS learners actively cooperated with each other in order to develop their common topics. On the other hand, due to the spatial and temporal limitation of email, the learners were found to develop unique ways of topic management such as overt reiteration of the interlocutor’s previous topic. The learners’ effort to be responsive to their key-pals’ prior topics frequently led to multiple topics in a single mail at the expense of textual coherence. The findings suggest that while communication via email is another showcase of learners’ creative strategic ability to communicate, the communication skills built through email exchanges can be only partially utilized in improving oral and written communication skills per se.

I. INTRODUCTION

Research on second language acquisition has undergone a great change in paradigm during the past few decades. Second language development, which had traditionally been considered as individual cognitive process, is now viewed as a process of a more social, constructive, and interpersonal nature. According to the interactionist model of language acquisition, the key to the development of communicative competence lies in interpersonal interaction, through which meaning is negotiated between communicators (Long, 1981, 1996; Pica, 1988, Veronis & Gass, 1985). Its natural corollary to language teaching is that
the learners should be given sufficient opportunities of oral interaction that will allow them to get exposed to the target language use. Ways to warrant interactive language use in the language classroom have been proposed.

However, many classroom activities devised for interaction through L2 are not as authentic as one expects them to be, because most of the foreign language classes are composed of learners with the same language background. Activities devoid of real need to use the target language frequently lead many classroom learners to slip into their mother tongue.

The advent of the computer era at this juncture, especially the availability of computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as email or network based chatting, is exerting a great influence on our educational environment, opening up the possibility of providing a supplementary or even a better alternative to EFL classroom interaction. Through CMC, learners can communicate with people who have different language backgrounds, where the use of English as a channel is necessitated. This new promising avenue prompted researchers and educators to explore the ways in which CMC could provide more authentic language use environment and thereby develop learners’ communicative ability, especially conversational skills.

A great deal of research has been conducted on the viability of CMC in promoting various components of communicative ability. The conversational features of synchronous CMC, especially chatting, became one of the main concerns, because of its alleged similarities to oral conversation. Research findings on the oral nature of synchronous CMC so far seem to generally support that CMC shares a great deal of conversational characteristics with oral communication. Moreover, the viability of CMC is generally being endorsed not only in communication between a native speaker and a non-native speaker (Kötter, 2003) but also between non-native speakers (Hera Chu, 2006; Kyung-Ja Park, 2001; Pellettieri, 2000). Pedagogical implications have been suggested from the parallelism between oral conversation and CMC: CMC might substitute at least some part of classroom face-to-face conversation and that it can be a better, more authentic means of fostering language ability as well as learner autonomy.

While studies seeking conversational benefits have mostly focused on synchronous CMC, researchers also find email exchange a promising way of equipping learners with skills transferable to oral conversation. As email is a two-way mode of communication, just like oral conversation and chatting, the status of email has been believed to be somewhere between conversation and conventional writing. In addition, email is a highly attractive tool of communication. Unlike synchronous chatting, where time arrangement between partners constitutes one of the major causes of difficulty and inefficiency (Heekyong Choi, 2004), email allows more flexibility to people living in different time zones, thanks to the very lack of synchronicity. Email exchanges do not require the addressee of the message to
be present while the addressee sends the message. Considering these advantages, it is reasonable to seek the potential of email dialogue in developing oral proficiency in the second/foreign language setting.

The present paper is an attempt to investigate the conversational dimension of email exchanges between non-native speakers of English. Specifically, it addresses the questions of how EFL learners with different linguistic/cultural backgrounds manage their topics and what unique strategies are brought into the arena within the confines of this specific exchange mode. It further addresses the viability of email exchanges as a tool to improve EFL learners’ conversational skills as well as writing skills.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Oral Conversation, Synchronous CMC, and Email

A growing body of research home and abroad has attempted to demonstrate that synchronous CMC shares a lot of characteristics with oral conversation (Kyung-Ja Park, 2001, Pellettieri, 2000; Smith, 2003). Kyung-Ja Park (2001), in her study of NNS-NNS chatting conversations between Korean and Japanese university learners of English, reported that ellipsis, sentence fragments, pauses, fillers, discourse markers, and hesitations have been amply found, all of which are oral conversation features. Pellettieri (2000) reported that task-based synchronous chatting fostered the negotiation of meaning and pushed L2 learners to form-focused modification, and concluded that network-based chatting can play a significant role in the development of language proficiency among classroom language learners.

Researchers even went so far as to suggest that synchronous CMC can be more beneficial for language development. Summarizing recent research on synchronous CMC, Smith (2003) claimed that there are several major benefits of CMC as compared to face-to-face interaction, among which were more participation among students, increased quantity of learner output, and enhanced quality of learner output. Further, Warschauer (1996) proposed that benefits gained through class-based CMC can transfer over to spoken language, and suggested that the text-based synchronous CMC might better facilitate acquisition process by amplifying students’ attention to linguistic form.

While synchronous CMC has been widely discussed in support of its potentials for the development of conversational skills, not as much attention has been paid to the conversational dimension of asynchronous CMC. Abrams (2003), after investigating the effect of synchronous and asynchronous CMC on the quantity and quality of learner language in terms of lexical richness and syntactic complexity, found that the synchronous...
CMC group significantly outperformed the asynchronous groups in terms of the amount of language produced. The implication seems that email is a somewhat inferior mode of communication when compared with chatting. Jong-Im Han (2003) also suggested that synchronous CMC is more efficient than asynchronous CMC for developing spontaneous oral proficiency. Based on her study on the effect of different Internet tools on Korean EFL learners’ learning, she proposed that synchronous CMC is more useful for language fluency and instant interaction skills, whereas asynchronous CMC is more useful for improving learners’ accuracy and self-correction skills.

The mechanism of email exchange is different from conversation or chatting in many ways. For one thing, email allows more time to formulate ideas and to pay attention to the input/message from the partner. No such pressure of a real-time response as is experienced in on-line face-to-face conversation comes into play. Unlike oral communication or synchronous CMC, the interlocutors cannot receive immediate feedback from their conversation partners because they are apart from each other in time and space.

Yet email is known to bear some resemblance to oral conversation in important ways. The conversational features of email become clearer when it is compared with conventional writing. Lund (1998) reported that email allows a more personal voice compared with academic writing: in a study on the rhetorical differences between traditional academic writing and email exchange, Lund noted that email writings were more related with students’ personal lives when they communicated with each other over a network. In terms of register, email text typically takes on the informality of oral conversation. Yates and Orlikowski (1993), in their study on the linguistic and textual patterns of electronic communication, found that the syntax and word choice of email are informal, similar to casual conversation. The length of email compositions is known to be significantly shorter compared with off-line writing (Weasenforth & Lucas, 1997). Finally, email involves responsiveness: email stimulates dialogue and exchange of ideas, forever requesting response from the receiver (Nagel, 1998). In this paper, our focus will be on this last conversational aspect of responsiveness.

2. Speaking Topically

Speaking has certain conventions. Grice (1975) encapsulates these conventions in terms of four maxims: the maxims of quantity, quality, manner, and relevance. Brown and Yule (1983) translate the relevance maxim as “making your contribution relevant in terms of the existing topic framework,” or more succinctly, “speak topically” (p. 84). Similarly, van Dijk (1977) suggests that the utterances by two conversationalists belong to the same topical sequence if the propositions of the two utterances are linked or drawn from one frame of reference. According to Brown and Yule (1983), participants can be said to speak
Topically when they make contributions fit closely to the most recent elements incorporated in the topic framework. And this typically happens in conversation when each participant picks up elements from contribution of the preceding speaker and incorporates them in his own contribution (p. 84). The ability to speak in accordance with the ongoing topic strand constitutes an important part of conversational skills that characterizes a competent language user.

Topics in casual conversation are not fixed beforehand. They gradually develop in the course of conversing, according to the moment-to-moment contribution made by the interlocutors. So while each speech segment coheres with the preceding one and the following one, there can be soon little or no relation between early and later topics (Hobbs, 1990; Sacks, 1992). Hobbs (1990) compares this phenomenon of topic drift to a word game, where one is supposed to turn one word into another by replacing one letter at a time as follows:

RISE → RICE → DICE → DIME → MIME → MINE

While there is only one letter difference between contiguous pairs of words, the gradual shift at a local level leads to a complete change in the end. Likewise, a turn said in response to the interlocutor’s prior turn must stick to the proposed topic, and at the same time, introduce potential new topics (Downing, 2000), that is, the speaker in the current turn should make a contribution of his own relevant to the preceding topic. This rule of sticking and shifting at the same time allows people to talk topically. A new topic evolves in association with preceding topics. But too much free association can generate topics that do not cohere as a whole. Sacks (1992) called this type of conversation that generates a large number of newly started topics a “lousy conversation” (p. 566).

So far, we have discussed some essential characteristics of topic management in oral conversation. Topic management is important in email exchange as well. If the email partners want to manage their exchanges in a two-way fashion on a long-term basis, it seems quite likely that the two parties in email will cooperatively develop their topic structure, as they do in oral conversation. While it is reasonable to expect that these topic management skills developed through email exchanges can be transferred to face-to-face conversation, studies are almost nonexistent on network-based topic negotiation between non-native speakers.

As there is little research on topic management through CMC, synchronous or asynchronous, this study does not attempt to test any existing hypotheses. Rather, this study is an attempt to understand the nature of NNS-NNS topic management via email.

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1 The word list presented here is an adapted version of Downing (2000).
exchanges. While it is theoretically challenging in terms of discourse analysis to explore the nature of topic management via email, it is also expected to provide some useful insight for educators seeking the potential contribution of email exchange to the development of conversational skills as well as writing skills.

III. METHOD

Three research questions have been raised in this paper:

1. Do NNS-NNS pairs cooperate with each other in order to communicate topically via email?
2. What kind of strategies and linguistic devices do NNSs use in order to communicate topically via email?
3. How do the characteristics of topic management via email affect the NNSs’ written discourse structure of emails?

1. Participants

The data analyzed in this paper is based on a global email exchange project between Korean and Chinese EFL learners. The project started as two researcher-instructors teaching English at a Korean university in Chungbuk area and a Chinese university in Shenzhen area matched their students into 55 Chinese-Korean e-pairs and arranged email exchange on a weekly basis. The Korean participants were all English-majors or minors taking a CALL (computer-assisted language learning) class, and their English proficiency level ranged from low-intermediate to intermediate, with their TOEIC scores ranging from 510 to 820. The Chinese participants were mixed non-English majors taking an English course and were also at low-intermediate to intermediate level, with their English scores at the 2005 College Entrance Examination in China ranging from 525 to 710. While direct comparison between the two groups was not made, the Chinese participants reported that they were moderately higher in general English proficiency (mean=3.28), and the Korean participants reported that they were moderately lower (mean=2.58), according to the 5-point Likert-type scale self-evaluation (1 = “My key partner is much more proficient than me”, 5 = “I am much more proficient than my partner”), in a questionnaire survey conducted after the whole procedure was over.

2 The full scores in TOEIC and the English exam in Chinese College Examination are 990 and 900 respectively.
2. Procedure

Having received the email addresses of the Korean students, the Chinese students started to send their first mails to their key pals. To make sure they could exchange mails on a weekly basis and have equal times for writing and sending their mails, the instructors required the Chinese students to send mails by Thursdays and their Korean key pals to reply by Mondays. Before the exchange began, the students were told to keep the whole record of the exchanged mails and submit them as a writing assignment. The exchange continued for seven weeks until the Korean university entered into the summer vacation.

The students were also encouraged to share cultural knowledge and viewpoints, which was expected to help them to develop cross-cultural awareness and to understand the value of English as an international language. They were provided with little information on their key pals. Instead, they were asked to try to find out things about their key pals by themselves. The topics of the writing were not assigned in advance. They were allowed to write about whatever interested them, because it was one of the main concerns of the project to examine the ways the learners mutually develop and negotiate their topics via email. Apart from giving some brief introductions on how to write email in English, the two researcher-instructors mainly played the role of facilitators, helping them solve any problems during the seven weeks and making sure the email exchange went on smoothly. With the termination of the project, the students submitted to their respective instructors the whole mails sent, received, and saved throughout the seven-week period. A subsequent questionnaire survey was conducted to both sides of the participants by the end of the seventh week using an identical set of questionnaire items. The present paper will only touch upon a few of the questionnaire items directly related to the theme of the present paper.

3. Data Analysis

A total of 364 email texts (i.e., 182 exchanges) written by 36 Korean-Chinese e-pairs (i.e., 72 students) were analyzed. While 55 Korean-Chinese pairs originally participated in the project and submitted their whole saved mails up to the 7th week, 19 pairs were found to have saved less than four exchanges (i.e., less than 8 messages sent and received throughout the project). The mail texts by the pairs who failed to save more than 7 messages have been eliminated because the discontinuity in correspondence made it difficult to trace their topic development.

Individual topics in each turn of the emails were identified. Each topic strand was traced to see if a topic is incorporated in the following mail. The cooperativeness in topic management was measured in terms of the responsiveness to the interlocutor’s topics. The
responsiveness to the interlocutor’s topic, in turn, was operationally defined in terms of the rate of the partner’s previous topic being adopted in the current turn. It was assumed that the utterances by the conversationalists belong to the same topical sequence if the propositions of two utterances were linked or drawn from one frame of reference, following van Dijk (1977) as mentioned above.

We also followed Ventola (1979) in distinguishing different stages of conversation, and assumed that the phatic opening phase such as greeting and self-identification or closing phase such as leave-taking are not where true topical talk occurs. Thus, general self-introduction in the initial mail exchange and opening/closing remarks were excluded from the analysis. Remarks on mailing problems and other remarks such as excuses for a late reply were also excluded in the analysis. The analysis of the mails was thus confined to the centering (Ventola, 1979)—or the body—of the mail. Mails were also examined to see if there are any email-specific devices/strategies the EFL learners use in order to facilitate topical communication. Linguistic modification devices used were identified, and later, categorized.

The present paper is largely qualitative and heuristic in nature. While we will introduce some statistical data, especially some descriptive statistics about topic incorporation, our main focus will be on exploring the nature of NNS-NNS topic negotiation in the context of lengthened email exchange, especially NNS mode of topic incorporation in email exchange. The discussion on the results will hence center on actual sample texts.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Topical Communication via Email

The topic analysis showed that there was a great deal of topic negotiation between the key pals. First of all, the interlocutors, both Chinese and Korean, were found to have been extremely cooperative in developing their topics. Just like in oral dialogue, the key-pals took up the topic nominated in the previous mail (or the previous “turn”) and then incorporated it in their own writing. The sample utterances in Table 1 have been taken from the four initial exchanges (i.e., eight turns) between a Korean student HK (coded K12) and her Chinese partner PJ (coded C12), who together exchanged twelve mails in all. Because of the space limit, the table presents only those sentences that signal the topics of each turn. The keywords indicative of topics are printed in italics. Typos and other errors by the original mail writers have not been corrected.

In the initial two turns of Table 1, where channel opening and icebreaking rituals

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3 The participants’ names in the present paper are all acronyms. K12 and C12 indicate the Korean participant No. 12 and the Chinese participant No. 12, respectively.
constituted a major portion of the texts, the Korean student brings up a *China* topic, which is adopted by the Chinese partner in the next turn. In the 3rd mail, the Korean student initiates the topic of *spring vacation* and its associated topic of *school semester*. She also introduces *only child in China* as a topic. The Chinese partner responds in Turn 4 to the *only child* theme, the *vacation* theme, and the *semester* theme of the prior turn. In addition, an associative theme of *Spring Festival* is initiated.

Now in Turn 5, the Korean student adopts *Spring Festival* as her topic, and derives another associated topic, *May events in Korea and carnations*. The Chinese student then incorporates and develops the *carnation* and the *Spring Festival* themes, while introducing a talk about *major at college* as another new topic. As the process goes on, topics evolve and drift to an unpredictable direction, which reminds us of Hobb’s (1990) analogy of topic drift to a word game mentioned in Section II.

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turn</th>
<th>Sample sentences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (K12)</td>
<td>…I never been in China, but I want to travel one day…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (C12)</td>
<td>…As you are looking forward to come to China one day, I hope I will have a chance to meet you. I believe we can be good friends…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 3 (K12) | …I heard from my professor about spring vacation. Our classmates and I envy you because we don’t have that kind of vacation… 
…We have two semester in year… 
…When I was in abroad, I met several China students. They are all “only child” in their family. I guess you are also an old child… |
| 4 (C12) | …Yes. I’m the only child in my family… 
…We also have two semesters one year… 
…and two long vacation as well. Spring vacation is… 
…Spring Festival is the most important holidays in China. Every Chinese will try their best to… |
| 5 (K12) | …You mentioned about Spring Festival in your country. What is it? … 
…In Korea, we call May as family’s month…On the Parent’s day, sons and daughters buy a carnation and parents wear it… |
| 6 (C12) | …I believe carnation is a kind of flower, how to wear it? … 
…Spring Festival is the most important holiday in China. It is surely… 
…my major, it’s accounting… |
| 7 (K12) | …First, I tell you about a carnation. Yes, it’s a kind of flower… 
…You said your major is accounting. After graduation, what will you… 
…Also are you taking an English course? In China, How do students learn English? … 
…How about hobby? In case of Chinese university students, what are they doing in their free time? … |
| 8 (C12) | …I believe everyone is very pleased in May that I wish I will have a chance to Korea to enjoy it myself… 
…We began to learn English when we were very very young… 
…I am not sure about what kind of job will I do… 
…In our free time, we have a lot of things… |

*Note: K12 = the Korean student No. 12, C12 = the Chinese student No. 12*
Figure 1 summarizes the topics that have been negotiated from their first mail to the 12th mail. The figure illustrates how the stream of topics drifts throughout the entire exchanges between a Korean student HK and her Chinese key pal. As Figure 1 shows, the initial topics of spring vacation, school semesters, and the spring festival fade away. New topics emerge, develop, and wane. In the 12th mail, the exchange ends up with singing, Beijing, and exams. But one mail almost always refers to at least one topic from the previous writer and at the same time introduces potential topics of its own turn.

In terms of statistics, out of the 390 initiated topics, 279 topics were adopted in the
following turn. This means 7 out of 10 suggested topics survived in the subsequent mail.

**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiated Topics</th>
<th>Adopted Topics</th>
<th>Rate of Topic Adoption</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>390</td>
<td>279</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One topic was assigned 2.27 consecutive turns on the average. When only the topics adopted in the following turn were considered, one adopted topic appeared in 3.18 turns on the average.

**TABLE 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adopted Topics</th>
<th>Turns</th>
<th>Turns per Adopted Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>279</td>
<td>887</td>
<td>3.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above statistic figures well demonstrate that the key partners were cooperative enough to respond to each other’s topic and to make their contribution relevant, just as in spontaneous oral conversation.

2. Topical Structure of the NNS Email Text

While the learners’ responsiveness to their key-pal’s previous topics reveals their mutual efforts to cooperatively manage their exchange for an extended period, the very responsiveness frequently led many of the learners to respond to as many prior topics as possible. This, in turn, resulted in multiple topics in a single mail. As can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 1 above, the mail writers generally added new topics while adopting old topics. So, as exemplified in text (1) below, which is the full text of the 6th mail written by a Korean student MK (=K5), a large number of the NNS emails ended up with a collection of heterogeneous topics. The topical clues within the text (1) are highlighted in italics. Presumed topics of the text subparts have been provided by the authors of the present paper, capitalized and placed in the brackets at the right end of the text subparts. Errors made by the original mail writer, including lexical and grammatical mistakes, line changes with every new sentence, and typos have not been corrected or changed (See Appendix in order to examine how topics have been added as mail exchanges between MK (=K5) and W (=C5) proceeded up to Mail 5).
(1) MK’s Mail 6

To W,

This time, I append some photos. I worried about you are disappointed in my photo. In that photo, I’d [=I had] my hair permed, but I’ve straight hair now.

[PHOTO, LOOK]

And…I’m not a good hand at computer. Many of Korean youth use a site, “Cyworld” to make their own “Mini” homepage. That site is very useful and easy to make a homepage.

[COMPUTER]

Umm…In the past, Korean sit-com was very humorous, but nowadays, especially not. “Hello, Francesca” is the sole sit-com I take enjoy watching. That is a story of vampire family and great fun. Conversely, Korean soft drama is very good! Lately, I’ve gotten wrapped up in “the new recruit.” Shin-Hwa (Korean singer)’s Eric is exposure on TV.

[TV DRAMA]

And…Korean students aren’t taken army train in particular. Sometimes, as a substitute, all citizen has the day designated for Civil Defense training.

[MILITARY TRAINING]

And…Korean schools have two kinds of a vacation. Also, middle and high school’s vacation is little different with university’s. In university’s summer vacation begins at middle of June and ends at the end of August, and winter vacation begins at middle of Dec. and ends at the end of Feb.…

[SCHOOL VACATION]

MK started her mail with the subjects photo and her look, and next she moved to computer and homepage, and then to TV drama. After that, she talked about military training in Korea, and finally concluded the mail with explanation about school vacations in Korea. We can see that these quite heterogeneous topics put together seriously damage the wholeness of the mail text. As mentioned in our theoretical framework, Brown and Yule (1983) described topical communication as making contribution fit to the most recent elements incorporated in the topic framework. In email, however, the availability of all the topics of the prior mail in a full-text form may have freed the non-native speakers from the recency factor of real-time conversation, and instead encouraged them to choose to respond to multiple prior topics at hand. In this respect, email is an off-line communication. In view of its viability in improving conversational skills, it seems inadequate to transfer the topic managing mode practiced in email to topic management in conversation, because email is
not accompanied by the on-line processing and the time pressure, which are the essential constraints in oral conversation. The data also suggest that while trying to make their contribution coherent to the preceding turn, the learners often seem to lose their attention to the overall textual organization, often ending up with incoherent text composed of several choppy paragraphs.

3. Strategies and Linguistic Devices to Frame Different Topics

This mixture of heterogeneous topics within a single text, in turn, required the students to identify which part of the text is about which topic. To this end, the learners were found to employ a range of communication strategies of marking the beginning of a new topic as well as its relevance to a previous mail. The most common strategy found was paragraph segmentation, a conventional way of signaling a topic shift in writing (Bestgen & Vonk, 2000), as can be seen in (2).

(2) Ah… today is a stormy day, but I like it and have been looking forward to it, for it is so long time when I put myself caught in the rain last time. Because of the rain, I had so much beautiful memories. So, if I have chance, I will share the memories with the rain, and it will make me loosen myself up. And that is why I named myself Rain.

  Congratulate! That is great that you played so much final match, you should be famous in your class.

  Sorry to tell you that I am a bit elder than you! 9th Mar 19XX, is my birthday…

(C24, Turn 8)

The problem, however, seemed to be that many of the participants, especially the Korean participants, started each new sentence on a new line, as shown in (3), which is quite common in email writing. In (3), the first two sentences regard the same topic, namely, “a coming of age ceremony,” but K24, a Korean email writer, starts the second sentence on a new line as if she opens a new paragraph. Likewise, both the third and the fourth sentences concern her partner’s age, yet she starts the fourth sentence on a new line.

(3) I received your email very well. And I know about your “a coming of age ceremony.” I wish you had this interesting ceremony like mine.

  At last, I knew your age. You are older brother to me.

  We’ll become good friend without regard to age, though.

  Then, why did you send so many mail?

  It’s some error, I guessed…

(K24, Turn 9)
So, in order to mark that they are going to start with a different topic, the learners seemed to make extra-efforts other than just changing the lines. In this paper, we will limit our discussion to how the EFL writers moved from one topic to another within a single turn and, at the same time, marked their relevance to the previous turn.

In order to reactivate what had been said in the prior writer’s turn, the learners—both Korean and Chinese—were found to use more explicit linguistic devices of overtly referring to the topic. The most conspicuous strategy observed in our data was to repeat or restate a part of the previous turn by various linguistic means. The present study identified the following major devices, among others.

1) Direct Restatement: Declarative

One of the most frequently used strategy was just to echo a part of the previous mail, as in (4), which is an echo of the partner’s prior remark on a vacation, “I’m going to take vacation,” or as in (5), which is in response to the partner’s remark in the prior mail, “I’m gonna do a presentation soon.” More examples are provided in (6) and (7).

(4) You are going to take vacation! That’s good news. But in my case… (K9)
(5) You are gonna have to do a presentation soon. Right? Actually, free topic is much more difficult… (K10)
(6) Your favorite thing is music especially rhythmic music. What I want to… (C11)
(7) Your second major is English. And what’s your first major? … (C14)

2) Direct Restatement: Interrogative

This second type of restatement strategy is practically identical to the first type of strategy except for the fact that the previous topic is reiterated in an interrogative form instead of a declarative form. The learners used the strategy of repeating a part of the previous mail in a question form as in (8), which is in response to the partner’s previous talk “I watched Full House,” or in (9), which is a response to the partner’s previous talk “I have 7 days off from May 1.” More examples are available in (10) and (11).

(8) Did you watch the “Full House”? Actually, Bi appears as… (K3)
(9) Did you have 7 days off? Wow. Actually, we have the Labor Day… (K10)
(10) Are you a basketball player? keep my fingers crossed… (K20)
(11) Oh, do you have the chance to have a summer camping? It’s very… (C34)

Note that most of the examples of direct restatement sentences had “you” as the subject, which indicates that the current topics were taken from the partner’s prior topics.
3) Indirect Restatement with Quote Verbs: Declarative

Indirect restatement also involves mentioning a part of the previous mail, but the repeated portion is introduced by a quote verb such as *say, hear, mention*, and *ask* as in (12)-(15).

(12) You said that you were interested in the culture of Korea, but please… (K35)
(13) I’ve heard that you have two brothers. I’m… There are five in my family… (K6)
(14) You mentioned about Spring Festival in your country. What is it? … (K12)
(15) You asked for talking about our dreams in your last e-mail. I agree to… (C21)

4) Indirect Restatement with Quote Verbs: Interrogative

Again, this fourth strategy is similar to the third strategy in that the previous topical element is invited with a quote verb, the difference being that the matrix clause is now in a question form starting with “Did you say/ask…” as in (16-18) or in a tag question as in (19).

(16) Did you say you want to know about volunteer work more? Actually I don’t know it well… (K4)
(17) Did you ask my home is how far from my school? Um… I think… (K9)
(18) Haven’t you asked me result of my exams? Well, I did a good job in… (K19)
(19) You asked me why I want to be a teacher, didn’t you? I want a jog… (K1)

It is interesting to note that this formula was found exclusively from mails written by Korean learners, the reason for which might be attributable to some linguistic/ sociolinguistic differences between the two cultures.

5) Indirect Statement with Emotive Predicates

The learners also presented a topic in the prior turn by embedding it within a matrix clause that contains an emotive predicate. The sentences generally started with the formula, “I’m (so) surprised/sorry/amazed/excited/glad (to hear) that…” as in (20-24).

(20) I was surprised when I heard you will take train for thirty hours… (K1)
(21) I’m sorry to hear that SW 3 was not so good. I heard the film was… (K8)
(22) I’m so amazed that you went to the fitness club to keep your body stronger. I considered it before, but… (C1)
(23) I’m so excited to hear that you may come to China next year!! I am longing to see you… (C7)
(24) I am so glad to know that you are taking interest in car, so do I. But my…  (C24)

It should also be noted that this construction, which combines the prior topic and the current writer’s reaction to it, was much more frequently used by the Chinese learners. It is not clear at this stage whether the use of deeper embedding as in (20-24) is simply a matter of preference or it reflects cross-cultural differences or any possible differences in proficiency levels.

6) Topicalization

Sometimes the learners nominated a prior topic in the clause-initial position, by means of overt topicalization markers such as “referring to,” “as for,” or “about” as shown in examples (25-28).

(25) Referring to your best friend J, I felt lucky to have his name…     (C2)
(26) As for traveling, I also like it…    (C12)
(27) About movies, I think different people have different standards.     (C8)
(28) About film Hotel Rwanda, I didn’t saw it before…    (K8)

Other devices the learners used in order to orient their writing to previous mails included sentence openers such as “Just as you said,” “As you think,” “According to your reply,” “I agree with you that X,” “You referred to X,” and “From your letter, I find X” among others.

The above examples vividly show how NNS English email writers employ communicative strategies, and linguistic devices thereof, in a creative way in order to accommodate themselves to this relatively new mode of communication, and still to stick to the basic principle of conversation, i.e., the cooperative principle and the relevance maxim (Grice, 1975). It is evident that the NNS learners in email environment also make efforts to make their contribution relevant to what they think they have been talking about (Brown & Yule, 1983). In email writing, however, the interlocutors are apart from each other in time. The topics which have been proposed or developed in the preceding mail could probably have been forgotten by its original writer, by the time s/he reads the reply mail. So email writers might have felt the pressure to use some additional devices in order to reactivate the topics that had been developed in the recently exchanged mail. In short, there are at least two kinds of motivation in using such additional linguistic/communicative efforts: (i) to separate multiple topics from one another, and (ii) to signal each topic’s relevance to the prior turn.

The phenomena discussed so far clearly demonstrate how creative non-native email
writers can be in dealing with communication problems concerning topic management. In oral conversation or synchronic CMC like chatting, however, such overt repetition strategies as those discussed above are only marginally found. Between native speakers, this kind of repetition most probably occurs when there is a hearing problem. Or it serves the function of confirmation check—the speaker’s attempt to confirm that s/he has understood an utterance correctly (Long, 1981, 1996), as in “Did you say he?” Or, in an NS-NNS talk, it can be used as a corrective feedback directed to a language learner in the form of direct repetition or in the form of recast, i.e., a reformulation of a student’s incorrect utterance with implicit correction (e.g., NS says, “He has three cars” in response to NNS’s utterance “He have three cars”).

The markedness of the overt restatement strategies can be easily seen, if we compare our email data with the following excerpt taken from a study on MOO chatting.4 In (29), KS, a Korean participant, is having a chat with a Japanese learner of English Y.

(29) KS: Y, where do you live in?
    Y: I live in Chiba.
    KS: Chiba? Sorry I don’t know where is Chiba.
    Y: It’s a prefecture next to Tokyo.

The same chat would have sounded like (30) if the interlocutors had actively used the overt restatement strategy, as they do in email.

(30) KS: Y, where do you live in?
    Y: You asked me where I live. I live in Chiba.
    KS: Did you say you live in Chiba? Sorry I don’t know where is Chiba.
    J: You don’t know where is Chiba? It’s a prefecture next to Tokyo.

Dialogue (30) is awkward, artificial, and unlikely to happen in real conversation. Although (30) is surely an exaggerated version, it is clear that even non-native speakers use different topic management strategies according to the mode of communication. If this kind of restatement strategy and its linguistic devices are transferred to conversational skills, such transfer will rather do more harms than goods to the development of learners’ conversation skills.

Considering that the above overt topic marking strategies have been caused by NNS writers’ attempt to incorporate multiple preceding topics into their current mail in an

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4 Apart from the present study, the authors conducted a research as a separate project, where the participants were required to talk online in a MOO chat session. The excerpt in (29) was taken from a chat between a Korean student and a Japanese student who met at SchMOOze University, an online MOO chat site for English learners with various L1 backgrounds.
accumulative way, we can construe that some control over the kind and number of possible topics in email exchange might help them to focus more on each topic and keep them from excessive use of restatement devices.

In relation to topic number/type control, our questionnaire survey conducted at the end of the project (See Section III) showed that the participants of the present project had a slight preference for pre-assigned topics. To a questionnaire item asking if they would like to be assigned email topics in advance, about a half of the Korean participants agreed, while 35% of them disagreed. The Chinese participants showed a little stronger preference for fixed topics as can be seen in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4</th>
<th>Preference for Predetermined Email Topics (Item #16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean (N=40)</td>
<td>3.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese (N=54)</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To an open questionnaire item that asked the participants to make any suggestion for a more efficient implementation of the email exchange program, several respondents requested more control over their topics. Some of the responses were “Teachers should provide topics in advance,” “I’d like to be assigned a topic in advance, because without topics, we end up using routines and cannot elaborate on a certain subject matter,” and “Teachers should provide some topics for us to choose.” The responses from the participants show that some students feel it necessary to focus on limited topics, but they also reveal that there are other learners who want to write about whatever they like, enjoying the freedom of writing as autonomous users of English.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study examined the way non-native speakers of English develop their mutual topics in email exchange, by analyzing email texts written by EFL learners at lower-intermediate to intermediate levels of proficiency. It further attempted to see if the topic management skills built from email exchanges can be transferred to more general conversational and writing abilities. The findings so far suggest that NNS-NNS topic management via email displays some fundamental differences which are attributable to

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5 The participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement of this item (Item 16) using a 5-point Likert-type scale, with value 1 indicating “strongly disagree” and value 5 indicating “strongly agree.”
uniqueness of this specific mode. The two-way communication mode of email allowed the learners to cooperate with each other, responding to each other’s topics and developing common topics as their joint venture. On the other hand, due to the asynchronicity of email and easy access to the prior mails in full version, many of the learners were encouraged to become too much responsive to prior topics, which resulted in multiple topics within a single mail text. This in turn forced the learners to resort to a great deal of excessive topic reiteration, in an attempt to mark which prior topic the writer is talking about. As the EFL email writers tended to deal with multiple topics in the current turn, and as these topics were not related to each other in most of the cases, the mail as a written discourse tended to have a low degree of coherence.

These findings suggest that topic management via email is qualitatively different from that in oral conversation. Interlocutors in email exchange and oral conversation both seem to assume Grice’s cooperative principle and his maxim, “Be relevant.” But the maxim appears to result in an incoherent piece of written text in the case of email communication, although the same maxim contributes to coherence in oral conversation.6

While email exchange allows EFL learners to creatively exercise diverse cooperative strategies, we might say that these strategies unique to email does not make a substantial contribution to oral conversation skills of topic management. Moreover, in terms of writing skills, the free topic negotiation through email exchange can lead to incoherent text structure. At low and intermediate levels, email writing in a free topic management context might help building writing ability at the sentence level (Jong-Im Han, 2003), but its potential contribution to writing at the discourse level is highly questionable. Teachers thus should carefully plan their NNS-NNS email exchange program so that their learners can also learn how to organize their mail text in a coherent way. Teachers first need to examine the genre of English email and observe how two native speakers of English corresponding with each other keep their topics going in a long-term mail exchange. Students should be informed that the ways of topic management via email is qualitatively different from that of oral conversation or chatting. They also need to be exposed to authentic samples of this genre. Some degree of genre-specific consciousness-raising as to the format, style, vocabulary, as well as topic management might help. In-class discussion on the topics for email exchange can give students the initiative in choosing their own topics within the limited range of topics prepared by the teacher. Also, setting communicative tasks for the email exchange program might narrow down the topic range so that learners can communicate with other EFL learners more efficiently, without having their writing energy

6 One reviewer pointed out that both oral conversation and NNS email texts can be said to be coherent in their own ways, and that the apparent incoherence in NNS email might be due to the fact that with a single piece of email text only, we cannot see two-way nature of email communication.
dispersed over too many topics to handle.

The present study has some limitations. As the study was largely heuristic, no systematic comparison has been made with the topic managing mode in other types of dyad (such as NS-NS and NS-NNS dyads) in the email context. Research on NS-NS or NS-NNS topic management in email exchange is needed in order to further clarify the disparities among these different types of dyads. Also, the participants of the study were at intermediate level of proficiency. The findings of this study thus may have little implication for low or advanced level learners of English. The study did not cover the differences in mail organization and topic management strategies between Chinese and Korean EFL learners. Further study focusing on cross-linguistic/cross-cultural factors will shed insight on our understanding of email exchanges between non-native speakers with different L1 backgrounds. Our data has also been largely qualitative. More studies with quantitative data are desired in order to supplement our findings.

REFERENCES


Sentences Containing Topic Clues in MK’s email exchange with W

<Mail 1 by W>
–I send you one of my favorite songs.

<Mail 2 by MK>
–Last week, I’d 9 exams…
–Ah….. Thanks for your song, but…
–And…. I’ll send my mini homepage address.

<Mail 3 by W>
–I tried many times to open your homepage, but…
–You said you had 9 exams…I have 4 mid-exams…
–We have 9 days for May day holiday…How do you spend your holidays…
–Send you the song MEET again…

<Mail 4 by MK>
–Anyway, I’d nicely received your mail with your song…
–And I found out that we resemble each other, cause…
–Umm.. I’ve heard that you’re in spring vacation… Was Mayday included among the vacation?
–In Last weekend, I spent with my friends… Korean males get recruited … military service…

<Mail 5 by W>
–Just as you said, we are resemble each other… Do you like computers?
–I agree with you about the conscription system… Some of my favorite stars get recruited to army… I want to know that whether you need army train when you enter school…
–Do you know that Korean sitcoms influence our life much?
–Spring vacation…. May Day is the Labor Day… What about your vacation?

Applicable levels: secondary, adult
Key words: topic management, email, asynchronous CMC
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Received in August, 2006
Reviewed in September, 2006
Revised version received in October, 2006