



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

***SPEECH ACTS AND DISCOURSE STRATEGIES IN THE  
MANAGEMENT OF DISAGREEMENT IN GROUP DISCUSSION AMONG  
MALAYSIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH***

**ENGKU MUHAMMAD SYAFIQ BIN ENGKU SAFRUDDIN**

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**By**

**ENGKU MUHAMMAD SYAFIQ BIN ENGKU SAFRUDDIN**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra  
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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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**January 2022**

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Having the knowledge of communicative actions and the ability to use language appropriately according to the context (pragmatic competence) is paramount in communication. It stresses how important it is for us to perform well because pragmatic skills are essential to be developed in order for us to communicate appropriately. Communicative activities such as argumentation demands us to meet the pragmatic needs required to engage in the discourse, whether in the first language (L1) or in second language (L2). This is because not everyone shares similar opinions on any topic. Thus, managing disagreement is necessary for preserving the flow of conversation by being able to voice differences effectively. The scarcity of studies on disagreement in multi-person interactions, and the lack of natural-interaction data in studies of disagreement, have inspired this study. This study tries to explore how Malaysian ESL learners perform disagreement when speaking in English. This study is a descriptive case study. It adopts discourse analysis using pragmatics as the approach to investigate how disagreement is structured linguistically through the lens of speech acts and discourse strategies. It utilises data from eight group discussions involving 32 upper-intermediate level Malaysian ESL learners in a Malaysian higher education setting. The group discussion activity required the ESL learners to perform group discussions in a group of four persons each on a controversial topic that needed them to express their opinions. Findings indicate that the participants employed complex arrangement patterns of speech acts. These speech acts consist of multiple linguistic discourse strategies at the discourse marker level, propositional strategies, turn-taking patterns, as well as the argumentative structure of disagreement. From these patterns of speech acts and discourse strategies, this study uncovers how the participants managed their disagreement in terms of alliance-making throughout the discussion. They managed disagreement in multiple ways using indirect speech acts and linguistic discourse strategies which are evident in the alliance-making process. This study sheds light

on how upper-intermediate ESL users interact in group interaction, especially on how they disagree and manage their way through it. The findings provide implications for future studies researching disagreement discourse in the future in terms of research methodology and focus. Apart from that, the implications are also highlighted in terms of pedagogical approaches, and practices, especially in ESL settings. This encompasses the teaching content (e.g.: the importance of pragmatic competence), methodology (e.g.: useful expressions and strategies), and possible activities (e.g.: group discussion) that are effective in assisting teachers to get students to communicate in ESL classrooms. This can be done in order to further develop the pragmatic competence of ESL learners, especially in terms of managing disagreements during face-to-face interaction.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**TINDAKAN PERTUTURAN DAN STRATEGI WACANA DALAM  
PENGURUSAN PERSELISIHAN PENDAPAT DI DALAM  
PERBINCANGAN SECARA BERKUMPULAN DI KALANGAN PELAJAR  
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Mempunyai pengetahuan tindakan komunikatif dan kebolehan menggunakan bahasa dengan betul mengikut konteks (kecekapan pragmatik) adalah aspek yang paling penting untuk dipertimbangkan dalam komunikasi. Ia menekankan betapa pentingnya bagi kita untuk menunjukkan prestasi yang baik kerana kemahiran pragmatik adalah penting untuk dibentuk agar kita dapat berkomunikasi dengan sewajarnya. Aktiviti komunikatif seperti penghujahan, menuntut kita untuk memenuhi keperluan pragmatiknya, sama ada dalam bahasa pertama (L1) atau dalam bahasa kedua (L2). Ini kerana tidak semua orang berkongsi pendapat yang sama dalam mana-mana topik. Oleh itu, menguruskan wacana perselisihan pendapat adalah perlu untuk mengekalkan aliran perbualan dengan menyuarakan perbezaan secara neutral. Kekurangan kajian tentang perselisihan pendapat dalam interaksi secara berkumpulan, bersama-sama dengan kekurangan data interaksi semula jadi dalam kajian perselisihan pendapat telah memberi inspirasi kepada kajian ini untuk dijalankan. Kajian ini cuba untuk meneroka bagaimana pelajar Malaysia menguruskan perselisihan pendapat dalam menggunakan Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua. Kajian ini merupakan kajian kes deskriptif. Ia menggunakan pakai analisis wacana menggunakan kaedah pragmatik sebagai pendekatan untuk menyiasat bagaimana perselisihan pendapat distrukturkan secara linguistik melalui lensa tindakan pertuturan dan strategi wacana. Ia menggunakan data daripada lapan perbincangan secara berkumpulan yang melibatkan 32 pelajar Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua peringkat pertengahan tinggi dalam persekitaran pendidikan tinggi Malaysia. Aktiviti perbincangan secara berkumpulan memerlukan para peserta melakukan perbincangan dalam kumpulan yang terdiri daripada empat orang mengenai topik yang berkontroversi yang memerlukan mereka untuk menyuarakan pendapat. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa peserta menggunakan pola susunan tindakan pertuturan yang kompleks. Tindakan pertuturan ini terdiri daripada

pelbagai strategi wacana linguistik pada peringkat penanda wacana, strategi pendalilan, pola pengambilan giliran, serta struktur argumentatif perselisihan pendapat. Daripada pola tindakan pertuturan dan jenis strategi wacana ini, kajian ini mendedahkan bagaimana para pelajar menguruskan perselisihan pendapat mereka dari segi pembentukan pakatan sepanjang perbincangan. Mereka menguruskan perselisihan pendapat dalam pelbagai cara menggunakan tindakan pertuturan dan strategi wacana linguistik yang tidak langsung yang terbukti dari segi proses pembentukan pakatan. Kajian ini memberikan pencerahan tentang cara bagaimana pengguna Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua di peringkat sederhana tinggi berinteraksi secara berkumpulan terutamanya dari segi cara mereka mengetengahkan perselisihan pendapat. Dapatan ini memberi implikasi kepada kajian yang meneliti wacana perselisihan pendapat dari segi metodologi dan fokus kajian pada masa depan. Selain itu, implikasinya juga diketengahkan dari segi pendekatan pedagogi, dan amalan pengajaran, terutamanya dalam konteks Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua. Ini merangkumi kandungan pengajaran (cth.: kepentingan kecekapan pragmatik), metodologi (cth.: ungkapan dan strategi yang berguna), dan aktiviti (cth.: perbincangan secara berkumpulan) yang mungkin berkesan dalam membantu guru mendorong pelajar berkomunikasi di dalam kelas Bahasa Inggeris. Ini boleh dilakukan bagi memperkembangkan lagi kecekapan pragmatik pada pelajar ESL terutamanya dari segi menguruskan perselisihan pendapat semasa interaksi secara bersemuka.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DS	Discourse Strategies
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELT	English Language Teaching
ESL	English as A Second Language
FTA	Face-threatening Act
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
NS	Native Speaker
NNS	Non-native Speaker
SA	Speech Act



# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter contains the discussion on the reasons of why this study was done and why it is important to investigate speech acts, and discourse strategies in looking at how disagreement is managed in ESL communication. In detail, the discussion is manifested through explaining the background, problem statement, purpose, and objectives of the study.

### 1.2 Background of the Study

Languages (e.g.: English, Spanish, Mandarin, etc.) are believed to be the medium of communication between people, regardless of their backgrounds. Communication among people from all over the world, irrespective of their identity backgrounds (e.g.: national identity, and socio-economic class), is the key to bringing people together for various purposes, like exchanging ideas and educational purposes. This idea of how languages bring people together for various purposes is in line with what has been highlighted by UNESCO (2009), that in realising continuous international development, communication among the citizens of the world is vital. This is after considering the fact that through communication, exchanges, whether economic, trade, or ideas, among people from different parts of the world can happen.

Having the knowledge of communicative actions and the ability to use language appropriately according to the context is a paramount aspect to consider in communication (Bachman, 1997, Chomsky, 1980). This is because different purposes and different people that we talk to require us to use different approaches in order for the messages to be transferred effectively without affecting its intended meanings and purposes (e.g.: Savignon, 1991; Bialystok, 1993; Bachman, 1997). In more detail, being able to communicate appropriately is vital to be considered by all parties in the communication (being able to use language appropriately according to the context), which comprises the information that speaker-listeners use in request to take part in correspondence, including how discourse acts are effectively performed (Ellis, 1994).

The pragmatic aspect of communication has long been considered as a vital focus by researchers in the field of linguistics (e.g.: Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Kasper & Rose,

1999; Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). As a matter of fact, in order to achieve successful communication, linguistic forms are required together with the mastery of social usage (Glaser, 2009). This is because different purposes of speech acts require different approaches in order to meet the demands of the determined purposes of specific communicative events.

Leech (1983) defines pragmatics as the study of how utterances have meanings in situations of communication. In the same light, Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993) view pragmatics as the study of people's comprehension and production of linguistic action in context (p.3). As for Mey (2001), pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society (p.6). Horn and Ward (2006) define pragmatics as the study of those context-dependent aspects of meaning that are systematically abstracted away from in the construction of content or logical form. Yule (1996) describes four areas of pragmatic studies. These four areas are: speaker meaning, contextual meaning, how more gets communicated than is said (how listeners can get the intended message) and the expression of relative distance (what determines the choice between the said and the unsaid) (p.3).

Communicative activities such as argumentative discourse demand that we meet the pragmatic needs of it. It stresses how important it is for us to possibly perform well because it is an essential pragmatic skill to be developed. Disagreement is related to concepts such as oppositional talk (Bardovi-Harlig & Salsbury, 2004), conflict talk (Grimshaw, 1990; Gruber, 1998; Hammer, 2005; Honda, 2002), opposition (Kakavá, 2002), arguing (Muntigl & Turnbull, 1998), and antagonism (Tannen, 2002). According to Dippold (2011), the importance of the argumentative aspect of pragmatic skill is pivotal both in the first language (L1) and in the second language (L2). To negotiate our ideas successfully and perform well in argumentation, this important pragmatic skill needs to be acquired and mastered. Hence, understanding what strategies (discourse strategies) and how arguing, such as expressing disagreement (management of disagreement), is accomplished, would be helpful in understanding the negotiation of social structures and vice-versa.

On the same account, Angouri and Locher (2012) assert that disagreement is a common speech act that is expected in particular interactions like problem solving and decision making. They argue that it is incorrect to think of disagreements as purely negative; the nature of disagreement is determined by a variety of factors such as environment, society, and social norms and practices. Disagreement in communication can be distinct as the expression of a view that differs from that expressed by another speaker. When disagreeing, interlocutors face choices ranging from the most aggravated (direct) to the least aggravated (indirect) token of disagreement (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Yet, in the relevant literature, disagreement has sometimes been seen as carrying the connotation of hostility and should thus be mitigated or avoided as some consider it impolite (Waldron and Applegate, 1994). They define disagreement as "a form of conflict... taxing communication events.". Locher (2004) maintains that disagreement deals with the

exercise of power and a clash of interests and can trigger a form of confrontation. According to Kakavá (1993), this may lead to disputes and, ultimately, create a conflict among the people involved in the interaction.

In contrast to the view that disagreement is hostile, recent research has demonstrated that disagreement should not be viewed negatively. This is based on the argument that it may not necessarily result in conflict and impoliteness. Instead, it can be a sign of intimacy and sociability and may not destroy but rather reinforce interlocutors' relationships. For instance, Angouri and Locher (2012), contend that disagreement is an unavoidable everyday speech act in certain communication contexts such as problem solving and decision-making. Apart from that, Sifianou (2012) further clarifies on the relevance of disagreement in communications that it should not be avoided. This is because apart from its potential to be face threatening to the hearer, disagreements may also be deemed as a self-face threatening acts to the speaker himself. For instance, a speaker feels demotivated in voicing his/her own views openly and freely.

Moreover, in certain social situations, disagreement may be deemed necessary, and is preferred, since it can assist in strengthening relationships and increase active participation within a group (see Angouri, 2012). Apart from that, Sifianou (2012) further clarifies the relevance of disagreement in communications, stating that it should not be avoided. Apart from its potential to be face threatening to the hearer, she believes that disagreements may also be deemed self-face threatening to the speaker himself. For instance, a speaker feels demotivated about voicing his/her own views openly and freely. In the same view, Pomerantz (1984a) claims that disagreement in the form of a self-deprecating reaction to a compliment can be easily observed. This is more explicit when it is done overtly and immediately. Schiffrrin (1984) also contends that rather than causing a breach of politeness, disagreement among friends might improve sociability. This has also been reported in several studies (e.g.: Georgakopoulou, 2001; Kakavá, 1993; Locher, 2004; Tannen, 1984), claiming that disagreement can be an indication of familiarity, intimacy, and solidarity.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

While research in pragmatics has been done with great focus (e.g.: making requests, giving an opinion) among native speakers of English, there have been very few studies that look at non-native speakers' pragmatic behaviour in communication with each other. Furthermore, even though the findings of these studies provide a very different perspective on the nature of pragmatic competence, there is still a need for further investigation (e.g., House, 2003a; Knapp and Meierkord, 2002). Among the aspects of communication that pose significant pragmatic demand is when we need to argue or disagree with others during a negotiation or discussion (e.g.: Bardovi-Harlig and Salsbury, 2004; Dippold, 2011; Doehler and Pochon-Berger,

2011; Fujimoto, 2012; Konakahara, 2017; Toomaneejinda and Harding, 2018). Disagreement occurs when participants' beliefs about their common ground diverge. Among all communicative activities, argumentative discourse or disagreement is one that permeates all aspects of life, and performing well in this discourse domain is an important pragmatic skill for every person, either in their first (L1) or second language (L2) (Dippold, 2011).

Scholars (e.g.: Schiffrin, 1984; Sifianou, 2012; Kakavá, 2002; Locher, 2004; Angouri and Tseliga, 2010; and Georgakopoulou, 2001) share a similar belief that in communication, not all people share mutual or similar views on all matters. As a means of keeping the conversation flowing, managing disagreement may be essential in voicing differences in neutral manners, which can then be projected in a variety of ways. Moreover, disagreement is an aspect of communication that is deemed necessary to point out issues and how from the issues, possible solution can be discovered in the most diplomatic ways (McHoul et al., 2008; Fetzer and Oishi, 2011). Pertaining to that matter, Flores (2008) suggests that speakers may likewise differ with a specific end goal to accomplish their objective or to present themselves as skilful contesters, who are fit to take part in a scholarly dialogue. This in turn might enable them to subsequently endeavour to improve their own particular face. For instance, self-assertion might be a socially endorsed property in a few settings, and this might be accomplished through disagreement among different devices (Flores, 2008:700). Thus, the main concern here is "how to guess setting and how to treat setting in examination is might be a standout amongst the most persevering discussions in pragmatics, talk investigation, and sociolinguistics" (Kasper, 2006:301).

As significant it is for disagreement to exist in our communication, it is also a question of how at that point we would be able to build up disagreement that produces valuable insight and knowledge instead of mere arguments which could not represent our intention to voice our disagreement effectively. Abundant linguistic studies have illustrated that disagreement isn't necessarily an avoided choice (e.g., Hayashi 1996; Kakavá 1993, 2002; Tannen 2002). Yet, it can be utilised even to cultivate intimacy, as well as friendliness (Schiffrin 1984; Tannen and Kakavá 1992; Dippold, 2011; Doehler and Pochon-Berger, 2011; Fujimoto, 2012; Konakahara, 2017; Toomaneejinda and Harding, 2018). What do we do when we have to disagree with someone? Do we generally surrender our stance in these circumstances to maintain a strategic distance from further conflicts? Do we reject different points of view only with the end goal of mutual consensus? In a nutshell, disagreement is significantly more complicated than it might appear from the beginning and can't be considered as a unified phenomenon, but particularly reliant on context (Sifianou 2012: 1555; Angouri and Locher 2012: 1549).

Most of the studies researching disagreement have concentrated mostly on the linguistic production by native speakers of English instead of on non-native ones. For instance, Bardovi-Harlig and Salsbury (2004: 200) presented discoveries on

disagreement in the research field, which has been seen as "moderately less research on understandings and disagreements has been directed at the speech of students and non-native speakers.". Furthermore, Lawson (2009: 4) states that, "given the significance of figuring out how to express one conflict viably through the mode of the objective language, there has, until this point, been relatively lack of research into how non-native speakers of English express disagreement in casual discourse.". Thus, this is a call for more research into disagreement among non-native speakers of English in casual discourse to be carried out.

A small but growing number of studies have been conducted to investigate disagreement practices in terms of disagreement strategies involving non-native speakers at the higher education level (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig and Salsbury, 2004; Dippold, 2011; Fujimoto, 2012; Toomaneejinda and Harding, 2018). These studies mainly looked at the strategies employed by non-native speakers of English when they need to disagree with someone in a discussion using English by focusing on the learners' development in their (dis)agreements. However, studies from different angles of focus are welcome in order to contribute to the body of literature regarding the phenomenon, especially in the setting of higher education level involving non-native speakers of English (Bardovi-Harlig and Salsbury, 2004).

The aforementioned studies managed to gather prominent findings indicating that some non-native speakers are found to be able to voice their disagreement in ways that are indirect and use multiple ways like what native speakers of English would do. Like most of the speech acts, they found that the ways the speech act of disagreement is produced vary in terms of direct and indirect disagreement, and might be different in different contexts (Leech, 2016; and Levinson, 2017; Toomaneejinda and Harding, 2018). For instance, the direct disagreement act is subdivided in terms of explicitness into explicit and implicit disagreement. While indirect disagreement can include declarative, questionable, and imperative statements, this phenomenon might happen differently in different contexts (whether it is ESL, EFL, or ELF). This suggests that there is still room for more studies to explore how non-native users of English perform linguistically when they need to disagree in their linguistic interactions in other non-native settings. For instance, the focus from other angles, such as in the ESL context, might shed some more light and further contribute to the knowledge by modestly redressing the balance in support of disagreements as produced by non-native speakers of English.

Moreover, previous studies investigating disagreement were conducted using discourse completion tasks (DCT) or role-plays (i.e.: Kreutel (2007); Hauser, 2009; Behnam & Niroomand, 2011; Dippold, 2011), which lack natural data being gathered and observed. This is a call for more authentic natural occurrences to be gathered and analysed in studying disagreement (Toomaneejinda and Harding, 2018). For instance, natural data can be gathered using a spontaneous topic to encourage a group of participants to discuss (Fujimoto, 2012). Apart from that, many studies were done involving dyadic interaction instead of group discussion (e.g.:



Dippold, 2011). This is a gap that needs addressing. As highlighted by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2010), "*trilogues are potentially more conflicting organizations than dialogues*" as a result of numerous extra opportunities to struggle for their turn to speak. Thus, more studies utilising data from multi-person interactions could be useful in gaining more insights into how ESL learners perform disagreement in more complex interactions such as in group discussions.

In the Malaysian context, group interaction using ESL, such as in an academic context, can involve challenging pragmatic acts, and chief among these is, arguably, disagreement. The need to disagree amicably is important for the students to achieve consensus in group tasks as well as to negotiate meaning around academic topics. Disagreement is one of the most challenging communicative acts to perform in such contexts. While disagreement might be a vital aspect of a discussion task for critiquing competing ideas, obtaining consensus, and completing a task, it is also potentially a face-threatening communicative act which can carry the property to disrupt the social equilibrium of a group (Angouri, and Tseliga, 2010; Behnam, and Niroomand, 2011; Sifianou, 2012; Angouri and Locher, 2012). This is in line with a claim by Lawson (2009: 11), who iterates that "there appears to be an absence of studies which examine the common, yet highly complex speech act of offering an opinion in everyday conversation with a dialogue partner of relatively equal status or power." Thus, this could be further looked into as how equal ESL users perform disagreement when they share and voice their opinion during group interaction.

There is also a growing concern regarding the condition of ESL users in Malaysia, as indicated in the National Graduate Employability (GE) Blueprint (2012-2017). This blueprint has highlighted the concern regarding the lack of the ability to converse well using English among students and graduates in Malaysia, as voiced out by academics, and employers in various industries. This has been echoed in a study by Ibrahim et. al (2013) who specifically inquired the final year undergraduate at a Malaysian faculty regarding the ESL skills. In this particular inquiry, the majority of the respondents reported that verbal communication using ESL is an arena where they agree that it is a great concern. They claimed to have a lack of the ability to communicate appropriately in verbal parts of communication like exchanging ideas in academic discussion or simply dispersing knowledge and thoughts in their learning setting, which can also be an issue later on when they graduate and enter work settings.

Based on the gaps identified in previous studies, such as the scarcity of studies investigating disagreement in spontaneous multi-person interaction among relatively equal status or the power of non-native English speakers in casual discourse in higher education settings, it is an opportunity to investigate it from new perspectives and angles. For instance, in the pragmatic competence model as proposed by Bachman (1997), being able to communicate in the right context and content is vital in achieving pragmatic competence. It needs illocutionary skills and sociolinguistic ability. This can be tapped into through the lens of speech act and discourse

strategies. From the lens of speech act, each utterance carries meaning/purposes which has an impact on the hearers that invites responses. And in terms of discourse strategies, Gumperz (1982) says that, in order to comprehend each other's utterances, we should take a look at the well-arranged structure made by the speakers, which we refer to as discourse strategies. Thus, both speech act theory (Searle, 1969) and the discourse strategies concept (Gumperz, 1982) could provide a holistic lens to describe the pragmatic competence of ESL learners in terms of managing disagreement in group discussion.

Exploring how disagreements are produced from the lens of speech acts and discourse strategies in a non-dominant English-speaking context in casual discourse could be another angle worth exploring this phenomenon from. This could provide more new insights on how disagreement is managed in focus group settings among ESL learners at the tertiary level of education before they go into their work life, which requires them to communicate amicably in dealing with possible issues and matters that require their ability to negotiate in discussion with others in terms of speech acts and discourse strategies. These insights are useful not only for ESL learners, but also for other ecosystem stakeholders such as curriculum developers and ESL educators at all levels of education, from primary to tertiary.

#### **1.4 Aim of the Study**

The aim of the research is to explore how ESL learners perform disagreement when using English as a second language. This involves investigating communication through an analysis of the management of disagreement (discourse strategies, speech acts, and turn-taking patterns) when the learners perform a group discussion in English, which would enable us to see how their speech acts and disagreement discourse strategies are connected to each other in forming a management of disagreement.

#### **1.5 Objectives of Study and Research Questions**

From the aim of the study mentioned in the previous section, three (3) objectives have been set in exploring the phenomenon. The objectives are:

1. to analyse the speech acts used by Malaysian ESL learners when they disagree in group discussion,
2. to analyse the discourse strategies utilised by Malaysian ESL learners when they disagree in group discussion,
3. to analyse how disagreement in group discussion is managed by Malaysian ESL learners.

From the aforementioned objectives, the following are the research questions that would guide the researcher to conduct this study:

RQ1. What speech acts are used by Malaysian ESL learners when they disagree in group discussion?

RQ2. What discourse strategies are utilised by Malaysian ESL learners when they disagree in group discussion?

RQ3. How is disagreement managed in group discussion by Malaysian ESL learners?

The next section elaborates in detail the scope and significance of the study.

## **1.6 Scope and Significance of the Study**

### **1.6.1 Scope of the Study**

The study focuses on 32 ESL learners in a faculty of a Malaysian university. They have an upper-intermediate level of English competency based on their Malaysian University English Test score (score of Band 4). The main analysis is done on video-recorded data of group discussions in English. From the data, this study tries to explore how the participants manage their disagreement based on the speech acts and discourse strategies that they utilised when there were needs for them to perform disagreement during the group discussion.

The findings of this study are limited to upper-intermediate ESL learners in a Malaysian higher education institution, as previous studies mostly compared advanced and novice levels of language learners in group discussion disagreement. The findings might not be applicable to beginner and advanced ESL learners in the same setting. Thus, future studies of this sort can be done using data from beginner and advanced ESL learners. However, it is hoped that this study will provide some insights on how disagreements are managed in group discussions among NNS of English in other countries or settings. It is hoped that the findings can also further direct future research to be done in a more insightful way in investigating how disagreement is managed in terms of speech acts and discourse strategies manifested in group discussion using English among NNS.

Another thing to notice here is that linguistic politeness, power, and facework are not among the main focus areas in investigating how the disagreements were done. This is because the participants were grouped into a group which consisted of the same batch of study, gender, and age groups between 20 and 21 years of age. Thus, the power of hierarchy, gender, and age effects is minimised optimally in this study.



The factor that is looked at in investigating how disagreement is affected is the degree of imposition that exists when it comes to performing certain speech acts. In the case of this study, the degree of imposition refers to how face-threatening it is for the speaker when they need to disagree with someone or others in a group discussion.

### **1.6.2 Significance of The Study**

It is hoped that this research will provide new insights into the pragmatic competence of ESL learners. Through the lens of speech acts and discourse strategies, this study tries to carry out a more in-depth exploration. It is anticipated that this investigation will be able to provide a description of how ESL learners meet the pragmatic demand to disagree in multi-person interaction, such as in a group discussion setting.

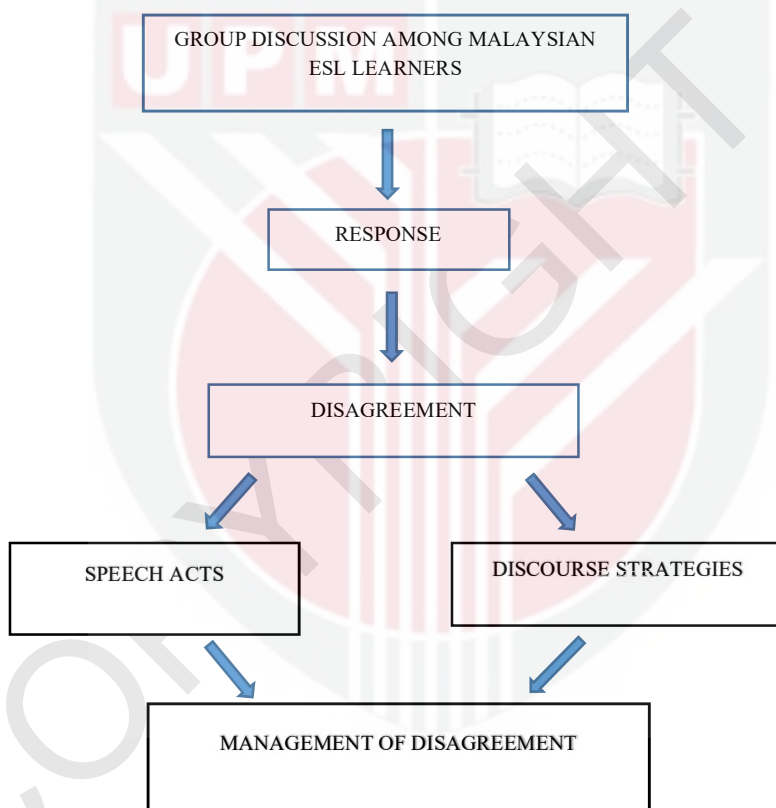
Moreover, it is also hoped that ESL learners will further realise the importance of being pragmatically competent, especially in expressing disagreement. Other stakeholders, such as the language curriculum developers, and language teachers, may also consider the importance of developing pragmatic competence via the content of the language syllabus and classroom pedagogical practices. Since very little has been researched on this topic in non-native settings, it makes a relevant study of which its recommendations are of great importance to ESL program design.

Furthermore, the findings of this study are hoped to provide valuable information for future research in further exploring the pragmatic competence of non-native speakers of English in resolving disagreements in group discussions.

## **1.7 Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

In some cases, disagreement can be undesirable for some people in an interaction due to its nature as a 'dispreferred' moment (Sacks, 1987; Pomerantz, 1975, 1984a) up to the extent that it could damage social solidarity (Heritage, 1984:268). However, it is normal to see that interactants will facetiously differ with each other to insist solidarity, as asserted by Schiffrin (1984). Schiffrin insisted that disagreement may likewise be a favoured reaction, as when one is acting naturally belittling ('angling' for a compliment). In expressing disagreements, speakers in a conversation may utilise various speech acts, and strategies in order to mitigate the turn (Georgakopoulou, 2001; Kakavá, 2002; Locher, 2004; Angouri and Tseliga, 2010; Sifianou, 2012).

The concepts deemed important in this study are group discussion, management of disagreement, speech act, and discourse strategies. Based on these concepts, this study believes that in managing disagreement with someone in group discussion, the speech act of disagreement that ESL Malaysian students produce could be observed. This is possible particularly through analysing what functions the act carries, and what discourse strategies are utilised in their disagreement turns. Apart from that, this study also believes that in structuring their speech acts and discourse strategies, their management of disagreement during the group discussion can be observed. The following diagram illustrates the concepts deemed fit to explain the phenomenon of this study:



**Figure 1.1: Concept of Disagreement in Group Discussion**

In verbal communication, disagreement sometimes can't be avoided as people have their own opinion/assessment of things (Pomerantz, 1984a). According to Sifianou (2012) disagreement "can be defined as the expression of a view that differs from that expressed by another speaker" (Sifianou, 2012, p. 1554). In the case of speech

act and strategies of disagreement, this study speculates that in order for a speaker to disagree with someone, he/she has multiple discourse strategies at his/her disposal. The theoretical account of management of disagreement used in this study follows the framework of Searle's (1969) speech act theory.

Anchoring to the idea of speech acts by Austin, who proposes that any language performs communicative acts, Searle (1969) further develops the theory in his own fashion: the essence of which is that to perform an illocutionary act is to express an illocutionary intention. Searle believes that we cannot account for meaning in the absence of the context of a speech act. In Searle, sentences (types) do not express a proposition. Instead, tokens or sentences in a context, express propositions. For Searle, the basic unit of language is the speech act or illocutionary act, the production of a token in the context of a speech act (not the word, the sentence type, or the theory). He further clarifies on the importance of what function a speech act carries is important in analysing the purpose and meaning of the utterances. This concept of speech act implies that articulating these functions necessitates a specific structural arrangement of specific parts of interaction. This may be seen in pragmatic competence, where rules are the key component that keeps the structure alive, as coincidental as it may appear.

Alternatively, Searle describes his speech act theory as a set of rules that establishes the link between meaning and the context in which it occurs. This set of rules links functions to specific language options in a given situation. A pragmatic method combines a syntactic/semantic investigation with the study of meaning in relation to speech contexts to form a pragmatic approach. Rather than concentrating on the meaning of the text, pragmatic analysis is used. He advocates in the theory of speech acts, utterances proposed by a speaker can influence other speakers. In more depth, a speech act is a unit of conversation proposed to play out other capacities in correspondence and to fulfil a purpose. For instance, if someone voices out disagreement, it can be detected in terms of what articulation it is (locutionary act), the purpose/meaning of the articulation (illocutionary act), and the effect of an utterance has on an interlocutor (perlocutionary act). This study was done in the view of speech act theory (Searle, 1969) as a pragmatic approach to discourse in looking at how utterances have meanings in situations. Speech act theory is used to detect ESL learners' disagreement instances that occur in the context of group discussion.

This research adopted parts of Searle's speech act theory to identify speech acts of disagreement in the context and purpose of group discussion among ESL learners by looking at the previous and subsequent speakers of a single disagreement turn possibly made by a speaker in a group discussion. This includes looking at the adjacency pairs, like when a speaker gives an opinion, and the following response by the addressed speaker. When managing disagreement, how speakers thread their speech acts reflects certain functions that can be associated with disagreement purposes. This reflects what Searle (1969) states in his speech act theory, that in conveying the purpose of a certain function of speech, speech act choices are vital

points where we can observe how the function achieves a certain purpose and is verbalised in terms of their discourse strategies. (in this study context, it is to disagree with someone or some people in a group discussion setting). This speech act theory by Searle (1969) in the context of disagreement (according to Sifianou's definition of disagreement) was deemed suitable for this study because it emphasises conflict and cooperation in interaction, which can be expected from group discussion interaction.

Apart from that, this study also adopts the view of discourse strategies as proposed by Gumperz (1982) in his theory of discourse strategy. According to him, discourse strategies refer to strategies employed during their conversation as an attempt to understand each other in that particular context of the conversation. Based on Gumperz's discourse strategies definition and theory, this study speculates that the way discourse strategies are expressed in terms of propositional strategies, discourse markers, argumentative sequence structure (deductive or inductive), and the turn-taking pattern in articulating their disagreements during the group discussion is of vital focus when analysing interactions such as group discussions in this study. This study was also meant to investigate discourse strategies in the group discussions in terms of direct/indirect disagreement strategies. In tandem with this view, Searle (1975) advocates that in order to comprehend the thought processes behind any articulation, it is regularly pivotal to compelling correspondence. This study tries to look into the pragmatic distinction between direct and indirect disagreement strategies based on Searle's directness and indirectness of speech acts, which defines indirect speech acts as cases where there is no direct match between what has been articulated (locutionary act) and its function (its intended purpose or the illocutionary acts), whereas direct speech acts are the vice versa of indirect speech acts. Hence, this study believes that in looking at the verbal discourse strategies, it is vital to look closely at how the discourse strategies are utilised during the disagreement turns. Apart from that, the way turn complexity is managed can also be observed by looking into how discourse strategies are managed.

A bigger picture can be used by looking at the way the disagreements are managed. This study believes that the way speech acts and discourse strategies are used during disagreement in group discussions are entangled together. This is possible as these two elements could show us how alliances are formed, maintained, and managed throughout the group discussion when disagreements are produced by the speakers.

In essence, this study tries to contribute to the knowledge about how disagreements are produced by L2 speakers of English. Secondly, this study also seeks to address the pragmatic aspects of disagreement in a collaborative context where there were no power differences among the participants. This point has been voiced by Lawson (2009), who iterates that "*there appears to be an absence of studies which examine the common, yet highly complex speech act of offering an opinion in everyday conversation with a dialogue partner of relatively equal status or power.*". Thus, an investigation tapping into how homogenous ESL learners manage disagreement in

group discussion setting could provide some insights and contribute knowledge to the existing literature regarding the phenomenon in the linguistics field.

## **1.8 Definition of Terms**

As with many specialised areas of research, the term and terminology can differ depending on the approach adopted. The followings are the definition of constructs deemed relevant and important in this study.

### **1.8.1 Speech Act and Function**

Searle (1969) defines a speech act as an utterance that carries a performative function in linguistic communication. It is a unit of conversation proposed to play out another capacity in correspondence and to fulfil a purpose. He defines function as "What we can mean is a function of what we are saying, it is also a matter of convention.". At the point when individuals have something at the top of the priority list then performed by means of utterances, these utterances are named speech act. Individuals would express a sentence in utterance. Based on this definition by Searle, this study defines speech act as the speaker's linguistically articulated acts, and function refers to the meaning of articulated speech acts.

### **1.8.2 Direct Speech Acts**

This study adopts Searle's definition, which defines direct speech acts as cases where there is a direct match between what has been articulated (speech act) and its function (its intended purpose). This definition by Searle deemed appropriate for this study because into account the linguistic and pragmatic meanings of directness of speech acts.

### **1.8.3 Indirect Speech Acts**

This study adopts Searle's definition, which defines indirect speech acts as cases where there is no direct match between what has been articulated (speech act) and its function (its intended purpose). This definition is deemed appropriate for this study as it defines an indirect speech act as an utterance in which one speech act is performed indirectly by performing another.

#### **1.8.4 Pragmatic Competence**

According to Chomsky (1980), "pragmatic competence means knowledge of the conditions and manner of appropriate use (of the language), in conformity with various purposes" (Chomsky, 1980) (p.224). Based on this definition, this study defines pragmatic competence as having the knowledge of communicative action and the ability to use English appropriately according to the context.

#### **1.8.5 Disagreement**

According to Sifianou (2012), "disagreement can be defined as the expression of a view that differs from that expressed by another speaker" (Sifianou, 2012, p. 1554). Based on Sifianou's definition of disagreement, this study defines disagreement as a lack of agreement on matters involve in communication between speakers.

#### **1.8.6 Discourse Strategies**

Previous studies define disagreement discourse strategies differently depending on different scholars and context. In general, strategies employed during their conversation as an attempt to understand each other in that particular context of the conversation (Gumperz, 1982). In disagreement context, the term 'discourse strategies' is defined as disagreement techniques (Pomerantz, 1984a), arguing exchange strategies (Muntigl and Turnbull, 1995; Toomaneejinda & Harding, 2018), pattern of disagreement organisation (Dippold, 2011). Based on the aforementioned definitions, this study defines disagreement discourse strategies as linguistic production during disagreement in group discussion in terms of micro level strategies like discourse markers (e.g.: but, however), and macro level strategies like propositional strategies (e.g.: offering counterclaim, giving contradiction statement), argumentative structure (deductive vs inductive) and how turn-taking is done.

#### **1.8.7 Group Discussion**

This study defines group discussion as a discussion involving three (3) or more people.



### **1.8.8 Management of Disagreement**

This study defines management of disagreement as how speech acts and discourse strategies are structured form alliances between the participants when disagreeing during the group discussion.

As this section defines the constructs deemed relevant and important in this study, the following section elaborates the outline of the thesis.

### **1.9 Outline of Thesis**

This chapter introduces the study by providing an overview of the research. The background and context of the study have been presented through a description of the historical and linguistic scenario related to ESL context. The rationale, the objectives, and the scope of the study have also been discussed.

In the second chapter, the literature in the major areas involved in this study will be examined and reviewed in greater detail and depth. This includes a review of the theories such as speech acts, discourse strategies, and pragmatic competence. Apart from that, a review of the literature on studies researching disagreement speech acts and discourse strategies in linguistic and communication fields would be useful.

Chapter three will describe the methodology used. This includes the framework, the approach to the data, the linguistic paradigms and assumptions, ethical considerations, sampling procedures, data collection and analysis, and the measures to ensure quality in research.

Chapter four will, essentially, address the research questions and describe the findings of the study, i.e., the speech act choices in disagreement turns and discourse strategies detected at the disagreement turns. The findings will be illustrated with examples from the data. The findings from the first two research questions will be check in order to look at how disagreements are managed.

Chapter five wraps up this study via comprehensive conclusions based on the objectives of the study. This includes a discussion of the findings in relation to previous studies on similar topics, such as disagreement discourse in group setting.

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