



# Spontaneity and Interactivity Features Displayed in Students' Transactional Conversations in English for Nursing Program

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### Abstract

This research was intended to analyze how spontaneity and interactivity features were realized in the students' transactional conversations in English for Nursing Program. This research was a discourse study. The data consisted of five transactional conversations by nursing students in English for Nursing Program. The data were collected through the following steps: recording, transcribing, selecting, counting, and reporting. Then, they were analyzed with spontaneity and interactivity features suggested by Thornburry (2005) and Thornburry and Slade (2006). It was revealed that the most frequent spontaneity features found in the students' conversations were chunks and filled pauses which indicated that chunks were used to help the students in processing language in real time, and disfluencies were depicted in the form of filled pauses. In addition, the most frequent interactivity features identified were discourse markers which served as the maintenance of the flow of the conversation and predicted what the speakers are going to say next. In conclusion, spontaneity and interactivity features were found in students' transactional conversations. In addition, it was suggested that the learners need to be exposed to the appropriateness of their use.

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## INTRODUCTION

The increasing needs of international nurses require a great demand of Indonesian nurses who are communicatively competent. It means that they have to be able to communicate effectively to achieve certain clinical tasks, such as obtaining patients' details, giving information, explaining medical procedures, etc. which mostly belong to transactional conversation. This type of exchange is regarded as a common feature of English for Special Purposes (ESP) courses (Thornburry & Slade, 2006). Due to a specific aim that must be achieved in the transactional conversation, nursing students need to be equipped with communicative competence in order to be able to participate well in the discourse and accomplish the goal of the communication. Therefore, they need to be aware of the conversation features helping them to cope with limited planning time and facilitating the smoothness of the exchange.

The limited or no planning time in producing spontaneous conversation will lead to the emergence of various spoken language features, namely performance features (Thornburry, 2005) which make spoken language distinguishable from written language (Thornburry & Slade, 2006). According to Thornburry (2005) and Thornburry and Slade (2006), the characteristics of spoken language can be derived from its spontaneity, interactivity, interpersonality, coherence, and relevance which, then, spontaneity and interactivity are focused as the two main characteristics of conversation by Jackson and Stockwell (2011) to serve certain functions in the conversation.

Spontaneity features serve as the helper to the speakers in coping with the real-time pressure of the language production. Thornburry (2005) and Thornburry and Slade (2006) mention that spontaneity features usually appear in the form of hesitation phenomena (filled pauses, repetitions, and false starts and backtracking), incomplete utterances, one clause or phrase at a time construction, frequent use of conjunctions (and, but, then, because and so), tail-slot-fillers (question tags, adverbials showing

speaker's attitude, vagueness expressions, and topic clarifiers), head of utterances, and chunks (formulaic expression). Not only do spontaneity features lessen the language production process, they also play an important role in maintaining the smoothness of the conversation to improve the intelligibility of the message. If these functions are unsuccessfully accomplished, disfluencies will occur which may hinder the comprehensibility of the information. Even worse, this failure may also lead to communication breakdown.

Since the real conversation, according to Brennan (2010), is naturally spontaneous rather than scripted, spontaneous conversation is "notoriously disfluent" (Bortfeld, et.al., 2001) and "disfluency in spontaneous speech is the outcome of a speaker's indecision about what to say next" (Gósy, 2001). Some studies on disfluencies have been conducted by Bortfeld, et.al. (2001); Clark and Tree (2002); Boulton (2006); Soerjowardhana (2015); and Ansar (2017) attempting to observe the emergence of pauses and filled pauses which showed the indication of speakers' planning, gaining, and maintaining the flow of the conversation to improve the listener's understanding. Although these studies regarded pauses as the indicator showing the gap of the conversation, these studies also acknowledged the disfluencies' role in managing the communication flow. In other words, disfluencies cannot be regarded only as a sign of communication failure, but they may also apparently maintain the communication in some ways.

In addition, some other studies on chunks have also been conducted by De Cock (2004); Van Lacker Sidtis and Rallon (2004); Nesselhauf (2005); Kecskes (2007); and Nekrasova (2009) to investigate the chunks or formulaic language used by native and/or non-native speakers of English. Van Lacker Sidtis and Rallon (2004) and Nesselhauf (2005) investigated the use of chunks by native speakers of English and revealed that formulaic expressions were highly used by the native speakers of English. This result reflected general knowledge of those expressions which was part of the competence of

native speakers. Similarly, Nekrasova (2009), comparing the production of lexical bundles between native speakers of English and ESL learners, also found that the native speakers were able to use a lot of variations in producing the bundles. They were able to do so because they were exposed to the language use since birth compared to the non-native speakers. Moreover, other studies conducted on the modification of formulaic expressions by ESL learners were carried out by De Cock (2004) and Kecskes (2007). The results of these studies shed a light to the strategy used by learners in order to overcome their lack of knowledge in using English by creating their own formula. However, the modification of the expressions seemingly caused the malfunctions, such as the under-using, over-using, and misusing of the target language formulaic expressions, resulting in the inappropriateness of the use of formulaic expressions.

On the subject of inappropriateness of chunks used by EFL learners, Neno & Agustien (2016) found that there were many unnatural expressions of formulaic language used in EFL learners' interaction as well as in the conversational texts as investigated by Mustapa and Agustien (2017) and Sugiyati and Rukmini (2017). As for this, Khusnita and Rukmini (2016) found that the unnatural use of the expressions may be caused by the unfamiliarity of the formulaic languages which is sometimes inadequately presented in the EFL learning. Furthermore, it was identified that the learners' problem in using formulaic languages included the tendency in using the expressions they heard from any sources without considering their appropriateness, the difficulty in producing appropriate formulaic expressions in given situation, the tendency to translate Indonesian expressions into English literally word by word, and the idiomatic meaning of formulaic expressions.

Since disfluencies and inappropriateness of using formulaic language could hinder the listeners' understanding and lead to communication breakdown, the students need to maintain the interactivity of the conversation to

maintain the information flow. With regard to the management of the conversation flow, interactivity features can be employed. Those features are realized in the form of turn taking, keeping silent while others are speaking, interrupting at times, signaling their agreement or amusement by grunts, laughs, and chuckles, back-channeling, questions, discourse markers, tails, interruption, and overlapping turns (Thornburry, 2005). As a matter of fact, interactivity features also play some important roles in managing the smoothness of the conversation and ensuring the messages to be successfully delivered.

Concerning the roles of interactivity features, some researches attempted to investigate how these features realized to serve a particular function. Fung and Carter (2007); Rido (2010); and Sujarwati (2017) analyzed the use of discourse markers by native and/or non-native speakers of English. These studies showed that discourse marker provide interactional motion to organize and structure the utterances. Consequently, the use of discourse markers will help to improve the understanding of the messages. Another study on interactivity features of interrupting, collaborating, and back-channeling was conducted by Widiyati (2016) which revealed that the participants did use the features, yet it is implied that they did not know the appropriate expressions to be used.

Based on the aforementioned studies conducted on spontaneity and interactivity features, it is noted that both spontaneity and interactivity features play important roles in unfolding the conversation. By employing these features in the conversation, the students will be able to manage their conversation flow to improve the intelligibility of the message as well as to avoid communication breakdown.

On the other hand, the issue of spontaneity and interactivity become a great deal in teaching English for Nursing since in EFL teaching in Indonesia mostly focuses on teaching the topic or the content of the language and less emphasizes on the macrostructure of the language such as the language features, when in fact, facilitate the learners to develop

and increase their communicative competence in order to perform well in the discourse. Therefore, the importance of these features in fostering the discourse competence needs to be given special attention in the EFL learning. They need to be included in the instruction, which is the hardest thing to do since English is learnt as foreign language and the students are never or less exposed with the how English is actually used by native speakers.

Because of the lack of exposure on the real use of English, EFL learners consider spontaneous conversation challenging since they have to produce the utterance in real time without an opportunity to prepare, edit, and correct it. This may cause disfluencies and communication breakdown that may hinder the intelligibility of the messages. Hence, it is very important to investigate how spontaneity and interactivity features are realized in the students' conversation to identify their way in maintaining the conversation in the hope that the teachers could pay more attention in exposing the use of these features to foster the students' communicative competence.

Even though several studies have been done in the area of spoken language features in spoken text, there are still few studies conducted to investigate the spontaneity and interactivity features thoroughly, especially on the transactional conversations by EFL learners in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context, specifically in English for Nursing. Therefore, this study tries to fill the gap by investigating the spoken features focusing on spontaneity and interactivity features based on spontaneity and interactivity features proposed by Thornburry (2005) and Thornburry and Slade (2006) that possibly occur in the conversation. For that reason, this study aims (1) to identify the form and the frequency of occurrences of spontaneity features, (2) to explain the functions of spontaneity features, (3) to investigate the form and the frequency of occurrences of interactivity features, and (4) to explain the functions of interactivity features in students' transactional conversations.

## METHOD

The present study belongs to discourse study. Five spontaneous transactional conversations of different nursing topics from ten nursing students, who were randomly selected, were gathered. All of the students were non-native English speakers who speak Bahasa Indonesia as their first language. They were enrolled in English for Nursing Program in Universitas Islam Sultan Agung Semarang. In addition, there were two instruments used in the current study. The first instrument was a list of spoken language features proposed by Thornburry (2005) and Thornburry and Slade (2006). The second instrument was an observation sheet.

The students' conversations were recorded and transcribed to find out their spontaneity and interactivity features. The students were asked to perform the spontaneous conversation based on several topics assigned by the researcher. They chose the topics randomly. After that, their performances were recorded in the form of video and audio recording. The records, next, were transcribed and the features were counted. Then, the spontaneity and interactivity features were analyzed. Finally, the results were presented in form of description.

To increase the validity of the data and to avoid bias, triangulation was carried out to make sure that the findings were valid. For the current study, investigator triangulation was used. A native speaker of English and a non-native speaker of English (Indonesian) were employed as the evaluators. To do a triangulation, the transcripts of the video were given to the evaluators. Then, the evaluator identified and classified the spontaneity and interactivity features in the students' conversation based on the theory of spontaneity and interactivity features from Thornburry (2005) and Thornburry and Slade (2006). Finally, after doing the triangulation, the researcher's findings and the evaluators' findings were compared to find out the similarities and differences. By comprehending those similarities and differences, the consistency level of the findings

can be drawn. If the similarities of the findings were 80%, it means that the findings were consistent. In conclusion, the results of evaluators' analysis were useful for the validity of the research findings in answering the research questions of the current study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study has four objectives. They are, (1) to identify the form and the frequency of occurrences of spontaneity features, (2) to explain the functions of spontaneity features, (3) to investigate the form and the frequency of occurrences of interactivity features, and (4) to explain the functions of interactivity features in students' conversations.

### The Forms and Frequency of Occurrence of Spontaneity Features

Based on the findings of data analysis, there are eleven forms of spontaneity features identified in the students' conversations. Those findings are presented in Table 1.

Based on the result of the data analysis, it has been found that chunks are the most common form of spontaneity features. As shown in the above table, there are 160 (59%) chunks found in students' conversations. This finding indicates that chunks are highly used by the students.

**Table 1.** Forms and Frequency of Occurrence of Spontaneity Features in Students' Transactional Conversations

No	The Forms of Spontaneity Features	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Total Occurrences	%
1	Filled pauses	14	21	8	2	1	46	17
2	Repetitions	2	3	5	0	0	10	3.7
3	False start and backtracking	2	1	5	0	1	9	3.3
4	Incomplete utterances	8	1	2	0	4	15	5.6
5	One clause/phrase at a time constructions	1	0	0	0	0	1	0.4
6	Conjunctions	4	5	2	3	5	19	7
7	Tail slot fillers	1	0	0	4	0	5	1.9
8	Question tags	0	0	1	0	0	1	0.4
9	Adverbials	1	0	1	0	0	2	0.8
10	Vagueness expressions	0	0	2	0	0	2	0.8
11	Chunks	34	34	34	32	26	160	59
Total Spontaneity Features		67	65	60	41	37	270	

Note: C = conversation

Further, it shows that chunks can be easily and quickly retrieved from their memory in order to help them producing the spontaneous conversation. In addition, the results also show that the students tend to modify the chunks by creating their own formula which is similar to the studies conducted by De Cock (2004) and Kecskes (2007). This modification, however, causes the inappropriateness of the use of chunks. Example 1 demonstrates the use of appropriate and inappropriate chunks taken from one of the students' conversations.

Example 1:

*D* : **Hello, I'm Dian. I'm a theatre nurse. Erm—I'm going to check you in today. Erm—by the way, how are you doing?**

*DR* : **Yes—I'm fine, thanks.**

*D* : **Oh, that's good. I just going to through in your checklist again. It is alright with you?**

*DR* : **Sure.**

There are a couple of chunks existed in Example 1. The chunks used appropriately in the utterance are hello, I'm going to, check you in, by the way, and I'm fine, thanks. While some

other chunks such as how are you doing, Yes, I just going through in, and it is alright, are used inappropriately. The expression “How are you doing?” is an expression that contains formulaic routines intended to ask someone’s wellness, yet the native speaker considers the expression “How are you feeling?” as more appropriate expression. Likewise, instead of saying “Yes, I’m fine, thanks”, the speaker can just say “I’m fine, thanks”. In addition, some chunks appear inaccurately, for example “I just going to through in your checklist again” which shows the missing finite and main verb (I[’m] just going to [go] through) as well as the incorrect use of preposition (in) and “It is alright with you?” which supposedly appear as interrogative sentence (Is it alright with you?).

These findings on the inaccurate and inappropriateness use of chunks indicate that the students still need to be exposed to the correct use of chunks in order to help them producing the spontaneous conversation. By providing numerous inputs of chunks in the language instruction, it is expected that the students are familiar with the formulaic expressions and able to use them accurately and appropriately in the conversation.

Moreover, the second most frequent features of spontaneity discovered in the students’ conversations are filled pauses. There are 46 (17%) filled pauses occurred in the students’ exchange. This finding indicates the disfluency in the students’ conversations which needs to be paid attention because disfluency may hinder the comprehensibility of the communication. Example 2 shows the use of filled pauses in the students’ conversation.

Example 2:

D : OK. *Er*—did you...it is your signature on the consent form?

DR : Yes, it is.

D : That is nearly finished, *er*—have you had a pre-med?

DR : Yes—I had an injection just before I come here.

D : *Erm*—pre-med given signed *er*—given, pre-med given signed to consent form. Great. *Erm*—alright. I will sign the checklist and, and then you will have already get a theatre

*cap for cover your hair and then you will waiting for a minute and I will take you through. It is alright with you?*

The filled pauses *er* and *erm* appeared in example 2 act as hesitators which are considered inappropriate for the native speaker. Since the context of the conversation is the hospital exchange between a nurse and a patient, filled pauses *er* and *erm* makes the nurse sound unprofessional like she does not know her job. However, these features are also used by the speakers to maintain the conversation by giving time to prepare what to say next. This shed light that the teachers need to pay attention to the students’ fluency in order to increase the intelligibility of the communication.

### The Functions of Spontaneity Features

The aforementioned spontaneity features found in the students’ transactional conversations serve particular functions.

**Filled pauses.** There are some functions of filled pauses but in this research, there are only three functions identified; they are hesitation proper, signposting speaker turns, and correction.

**Repetitions.** Some speakers make repetitions to gain time to plan or formulate what to say next and to correct or restate the previously stated utterance. Repetitions as verbal nodding are also found in the students’ conversations.

**False start and backtracking.** False start and backtracking are used in the students’ conversations to correct the utterances previously said. They serve as the speakers’ attempt to monitor their utterance and correct the error.

**Incomplete utterances.** Incomplete utterances found in the students’ conversations are mostly in the form of response utterances. They function as the response token to keep the conversations going.

**One clause/phrase at a time construction.** One clause/phrase at a time construction show that the speakers produced smaller runs representing unit of meaning and are often linked by the highly frequent

conjunctions *and*, *but*, and *so* rather than constructing sentence-length unit.

**Conjunctions.** From the data analysis, the conjunctions found in the conversation are *and*, *but*, and *then*, and *then* which function to connect the negation relationship of the clauses (*but*) and to join the related statements together to give the addition relationship of the utterances (*and*, and *then*).

**Tail slot fillers.** The tail-slot-fillers found in this study include question tags, adverbials that convey speaker attitude, and vagueness expressions. Question tags function as the reinforcement of topic at the end of utterance as well as the interactive function and evaluation of the main information presented. The speakers also use some adverbials to convey their attitude, while vagueness expressions indicate that the speaker is not sure about the information given and to save time during a conversation.

**Chunks.** Chunks are also found in the students' conversation to enable creative language use in addition to swift and efficient recall of common word combinations. The students used a high frequency of chunks which indicated that chunks can be easily and quickly retrieved from the students' memory that help the language process.

**The Forms and Occurrence of Interactivity Features**

Based on the findings of data analysis from the five conversations, there are six forms of interactivity features identified in the students' conversation. Those findings are summarized in Table 2.

Based on the result of the data analysis, it has been found that discourse markers are the most common form of interactivity features.

**Table 2.** Frequency of Occurrence of Interactivity Features in Students' Transactional Conversations

No	The Forms of Interactivity Features	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Total Occurrences	%
1	Interactional signals	11	6	11	7	5	40	22
2	Back channels	7	5	5	4	11	32	17.6
3	Discourse markers	13	10	6	11	12	52	28.6
4	Questions	9	13	13	6	10	51	28
5	Overtures	1	0	0	1	0	2	1.1
6	Tails	1	0	1	3	0	5	2.8
Total Interactivity Features		42	34	36	32	38	182	
Turns		24	27	29	21	33	134	

Note: C = conversation

As shown in the table above, there are 52 (28.6%) discourse markers found in students' conversation which serve as the merger and hints of the discourse creator to predict what the people are going to say next to make the conversations unfold. The use of discourse markers in students' conversation is presented in Example 3.

Example 3:

DV : *Can you come to my office? I have something to talk to you.*

F : *Erm-- **alright.** Erm-- Let me just finish this chart **and** I will come to your office.*

DV : *Hi Frisca. Thanks for coming up to my office. **Well,** it's about Mr. John. Would you mind giving me some advice on his wound care management?*

F : *Erm-- No, not at all. That's what's I'm here for.*

DV : *Hmm... **Right.** Mr. John is a seventy year old patient.*

The example 3 above presents us that discourse markers occur appropriately in the

students' conversations. Discourse markers *'alright'* and *'right'* are used to mark the beginning of a segment of talk, and *'well'* is used to initiate turn and mark the onset of contrast showing different topic with the preceding turn. In addition, *'and'* signals the continuity to the previous utterance. Therefore, the findings show that the students are able to employ these features to maintain the flow of the talk. Not only do they maintain the flow of the talk, but they also maintain the smoothness of the conversations which foster the comprehensibility of the information.

### **The Functions of Interactivity Features**

The interactivity features realized in the students' conversation serve several functions in order to maintain the flow of the information.

**Interactional signals.** Interactional signals identified in this study function as a feedback and response elicitors. They are also used to start, sustain, and end a conversation.

**Backchannels.** Back channel devices found in the students' conversation indicate agreement, and supporting role to show listener's continued attention.

**Discourse markers.** Several discourse markers are also found in the students' conversation such as *'Oh'*, *'OK'*, *'but'*, *'and'*, *'alright'*, *'right'*, *'well'*, *'firstly'*, *'then'*, *'finally'*, *'because'*, and *'before'* which function to maintain the flow of the information in the conversation.

**Questions.** The interactivity is also maintained by the use of questions. There are two functions of questions identified in this study; they are information-seeking questions and indirect requests.

**Overtures.** Overtures serve to launch the utterances. There is only one kind of overture found in this study, i.e. *"by the way"* that is used to introduce afterthoughts that do not contradict what has already been said, but it indicates a change in direction of the conversation.

**Tails.** To qualify the utterance or to solicit listener involvement, the speakers also use tails such as *"...OK?"* *"...wasn't it?"* *"...right?"* to clarify certain information.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the analysis of the findings, the spontaneity features found in students' conversation in English for Nursing program can be classified into eight forms. They are filled pauses, repetitions, false start and backtracking, incomplete utterances, one clause/phrase at a time constructions, conjunctions, tail slot fillers, and chunks. The most frequent feature of spontaneity is chunks (160 times), which indicate that chunks can be easily and quickly processed from the students' memory that help the language production. Moreover, filled pauses (81 times) are the second frequent form of the features identified in students' conversation which indicate the disfluency in the students' conversation. With regard to the functions of spontaneity features, they serve as the hesitating sign, signposting the turn, gaining time, correcting, monitoring, restating and responding the utterance previously said.

In addition, the students showed various ways to maintain the interactivity in the conversation. They can be classified into six forms of interactivity features, namely interactional signals, back channels, discourse markers, questions, overtures, and tails. The occurrence of interactivity features in the students' conversation is different from one to another. The greater number on one form of these features is discourse markers (52 times) which serve as the merger and hints of the discourse creator to predict what the people are going to say next to make the text unfold from the other. Additionally, there are some functions of interactivity features in the students' conversations. They functioned as feedback, response elicitors, indicators of agreement and listener's attention, maintenance of the flow of the conversation, utterance launcher, and clarification of certain information.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the students attempt to maintain the intelligibility of the communication as well as to manage the flow of the information as realized in the spontaneity and interactivity features in the students' conversations. However, some



features were still considered as inappropriate by the native speakers. This appropriateness might be caused by the lack of exposure in the real use of English in EFL learners. Therefore, teaching spoken language features in terms of spontaneity and interactivity features will help to foster the students' fluency and face-to-face conversation, and prevents them from speaking English like a textbook.

In addition, to enhance the students' exposure on the spoken language features, the teacher should use authentic spoken texts. The teachers should introduce all the forms of spontaneity features to improve the fluency and interactivity features to maintain the flow of the conversation. If the students are familiar with the spontaneity and interactivity features, they will be able to communicate fluently and effectively.

However, the current study still has some limitations. Firstly, on account of this study only analyzes spontaneity and interactivity in students' conversation in English for Nursing Program in 4th semester students, this study is not able to capture the use of spontaneity and interactivity features in other ESP program as well as the different grade in English for Nursing Program. Hence, the future research should also extend the other ESP programs to obtain richer data.

Finally, because the current study only aims to investigate the forms and the functions of spontaneity and interactivity features in students' conversation, the future research can also evaluate the appropriateness and accuracy in the use of spontaneity and interactivity features whether they are used accurately and appropriately in the conversation.

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