

## Alliance Formation During Disagreement in Group Discussion Among ESL Learners

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### ABSTRACT

The study examines how disagreement is managed by 32 intermediate level Malay ESL students in a Malaysian higher education setting in group discussion in terms of alliance formation. The group discussions in a group of four on a controversial topic were video-recorded to capture how they manage disagreements through the way they formed alliances among themselves throughout the discussion when they expressed opinions using English. The data analysis involved pragmatics as the approach to analyse speech acts and discourse strategies utilised by the participants when they manage disagreements in the discussion. The findings indicate that the participants draw themselves into alliance with one another using various discourse strategies. They managed disagreement in multiple ways using indirect speech acts, and various discourse strategies that are evident in the alliance-making process. The findings could have implications for future studies researching disagreement discourse. Apart from that, 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.

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**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature on how intermediate ESL users disagree in group discussion and manage it in terms of forming alliances among themselves through speech acts and discourse strategies. The findings provide implications for ESL pedagogical approaches and future studies researching disagreement discourse in terms of research methodology and focus.

## 1. Introduction

Chomsky (1980) asserts that the pragmatic aspect is critical in all forms of communication (e.g.: making a request, making a statement, asserting disagreement etc). According to him, pragmatic competence refers to the "knowledge of the conditions and manner of appropriate use (of the language) in accordance with various purposes" (Chomsky, 1980). For instance, disagreement needs to be done appropriately in different contexts in order to preserve its purpose and meaning. It can be done differently in different types of communication setting like in dyadic interaction or in group discussion setting (Kakava, 2002; Locher, 2004; Angouri & Tseliga, 2010; Dippold, 2011; Konakahara, 2017).

Disagreement in multi-person interaction offers the participants options which are not found in dyadic interaction, like the opportunities for collective disagreement. This has been highlighted by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2010) as she claims that trilogues are potentially more conflicting organizations than dialogues (p.92). When a disagreement between two participants arises, other participants in that particular group discussion have the opportunity to join one of the sides. This may result in the aligning of one-self with other persons in producing arguments and counter-arguments collectively. An oppositional alliance is one example of the potential formation of alliances as a result of sharing mutual opinion on a subject or the emergence of subgroups in a multi-person setting.

Several studies (e.g.: Toomaneejinda & Harding, 2018; Fujimoto, 2012; Kangasharju, 2002) have explored how EFL speakers manage their disagreements in terms of alliance formation when they perform group discussions. Their findings indicate that some non-native speakers voice their disagreement in ways that are indirect and use multiple ways that are different compared to those used in dyadic interactions. These studies note that the way alliances are made differ in different settings such as in a classroom interaction or in group talk.

This study intends to explore how alliances are made when meeting the pragmatic demand of disagreement in group discussion among ESL students. In particular, this study analyses how disagreement is managed in terms of alliance formation based on an examination of speech acts and discourse strategies.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Linguistic Studies on Disagreement

This study adopts the definition of disagreement as proposed by Sifianou (2012). She defines it as "the expression of a view that differs from that expressed by another speaker" (Sifianou, 2012, p. 1554). In her view, disagreement happens when two or more people voice their different views regarding certain issues in communication.

Disagreement may be a source of conflict because it has a face-threatening value, which has the risk of upsetting a group's social equilibrium (Angouri & Tseliga, 2010; Sifianou, 2012; Angouri & Locher, 2012). According to Lawson (2009, p. 11), "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, it is worth investigating further in terms of how ESL learners handle disagreement when sharing their thoughts in a group setting.

## 2.2. Speech Acts in Disagreement Discourse

In terms of disagreement, [Searle \(1975\)](#) offers four conditions and criteria that should be met for a proposition to be realised as an act of disagreement ([Searle, 1975: 361-362](#)):

- i. Preparatory condition:
  - a) S1 has asserted or implied or is believed to have asserted or implied P.
  - b) S2 understands the propositional content of P and there is no need for further information.
- ii. Propositional condition: S2 asserts or implies different from P or Not P.
- iii. Sincerity condition:
  - a) S2 believes that S1 has asserted P.
  - b) S2 believes that S1 considers P to be true.
  - c) S2 wants to inform S1 that S2 is of a different opinion and, therefore, agreement is not possible.
- iv. Essential condition: Either or both S1 and S2 count the act as an act of disagreement.

These four conditions are deemed useful in detecting disagreement instances as they offer detail ways in detecting disagreement instances in discourse.

In order to examine speech acts for disagreement, the study uses speech act strategies offered by [Muntigl and Turnbull \(1995, 1998\)](#). They state propositional strategies for disagreement are counterclaiming, giving a contradiction point, justifying a counterclaim, and clarifying a counterclaim. They explain that a counterclaim happens when speakers propose an elective claim that does not straightforwardly repudiate or challenge others' claim while a contradiction directly challenges an interlocutor's claim as the "speaker repudiates by articulating the nullified suggestion communicated by the past claim" ([Muntigl & Turnbull, 1995; 1998](#)).

## 2.3. Alliance Formation in Disagreement Management

According to [Kangasharju \(2002\)](#), once a team affiliation emerges, the participation framework is affected. The options of team members might become more restricted towards opposing the other team and prioritising one's own team. The relationship between speakers and recipients during team talk needs to be seen as different from dyadic interactions in the following ways:

- i. a participant can be addressed as a team;
- ii. a participant can act as a representative, or participants can speak in consecutive turns as an association;
- iii. a speaker can confer with another member as to the relevance of an association; and
- iv. a non-member can orient to and refer to the association as an entity.

[Kangasharju \(2002\)](#) explains that at the points when disagreement was expressed, participants exhibited the utilisation of various mitigation strategies that assisted them with keeping up alignment and affiliation. They react not as people, but as an aggregate guiding their reactions to a gathering that is against them.

Similarly, [Doehler and Pochon-Berger \(2011\)](#), and [Bardovi-Harlig and Salsbury \(2004\)](#) have pointed out that in a team alliance, one of the participants act as the team's spokesman. The formation of alliances can arise in environments where conflict or competition is present. This points out the role of conflict or competition which are the two main entities that are needed for alliance formation. This can also be seen in other studies for instance [Sifianou \(2012\)](#), [Fujimoto \(2012\)](#), [Brett, Gunia and Teucher \(2017\)](#). In studying agreement and disagreement in EFL group discussion, these studies found out that individuals aligned themselves with collectives depending on the topic of discussion. According to [Fujimoto \(2012\)](#) the strategies utilised in forming alliances are ratifying a mutual stance, assisting the completion of mutual stance, completion of uncompleted mutual stance, and seeking consensus on a mutual stance.

There is a lack of studies looking into disagreement management in ESL settings. The present study explores in the Malaysian ESL setting patterns of alliance formation in disagreements in group discussions among undergraduate students.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design

In order to investigate how disagreement is managed in group discussion, this study adopts a descriptive case study design. Thirty-two Malay ESL students aged 21 with an intermediate level of proficiency were employed using a convenience sampling strategy. The ESL classroom context was chosen as advised by [Spada and Lightbown \(2009\)](#), where it is best used and observed; related studies such as [Dippold \(2011\)](#) and [Fujimoto \(2012\)](#) had also employed intermediate ESL learners.

#### 3.2. Data Collection

Participants were asked to form groups of four students each and they were required to perform a group discussion based on a given topic. They were given the topic for discussion 5 minutes before the discussion started. This was to get themselves together and think of the possible points that they could discuss based on the given topic. Each discussion which lasted between 15 to 20 minutes was video recorded. The study had eight groups of students and the data size comprised approximately two hours and thirty minutes. For the purposes of this paper, only the best examples are used to highlight the patterns of alliance formation used by the students when managing their disagreements.

The followings are examples of the topics used for the group discussion sessions:

- i. "Should firms prioritise competent people or experienced workers when employing new employees? What are your thoughts on this matter?"
- ii. "Should English replace Bahasa Malaysia as a medium of instruction in math and science classroom? What are your thoughts on this matter?"
- iii. "Should employers prioritise more on skilled workers, or experienced workers in hiring new employees? What are your opinions regarding this issue?"

#### 3.3. Data Analysis

The video data of the group discussions was transcribed using the orthographic transcription system, which is a verbatim record of what was said, meaning that repetitions, hesitations, false starts, and such were *transcribed as well*. The researcher

reviewed the transcripts several times while viewing the recording to avoid transcription errors.

Together with Sifianou's (2012) understanding of disagreement in linguistic production, the Speech Act theory by Searle (1969) and the four conditions for acts to be classified as disagreement as proposed by Searle (refer to section 2.2) were used to identify instances of disagreement in the data. The analysis entailed a microscopic line-by-line analysis of the interaction which involved showing how the interactants' utterances displayed disagreement.

Then, how the speech acts were organised in response to preceding utterances or turns was analysed using Muntigl and Turnbull's (1995, 1998) speech acts for disagreement. Fujimoto's (2012) strategies for team alliance were used to analyse the way speech acts for disagreements were organized across turns in order to gain insights into how disagreements were managed in the group discussions.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Formation of Team Alliances

In managing disagreement in group discussions, the participants in this study used a number of strategies which resulted in the forming of alliances among them. They demonstrated how team alliance can be strategic in managing disagreements among peers in group discussion. The participants drew themselves in alliance with team members when they opposed opinions or statements among themselves during the group discussions.

Discourse strategies were used to form team alliances. The study showed that participants signalled alliance by supporting mutual points of group members. The discourse strategies employed by the participants of this study were:

- i. ratifying a disagreement turn and giving an upgraded assessment
- ii. collaboration through completing an uncompleted turn,
- iii. collaboration in supporting a single point of disagreement using a direct agreement and a clarification or justification
- iv. seeking for an agreement

These strategies are explained below.

#### 4.1.1. Ratifying A Disagreement Turn and Giving an Upgraded Assessment

In the analysis, pseudonyms are given to all participants, such as G1S1 refers to the Speaker 1 in Group Discussion 1. With the initial 'G' refers to group discussion, and the initial 'S' refers to speaker. In the data, it has been detected that the token of agreement "*I agree with*" was used by many participants. The first example can be seen in the following lines:

#### Excerpt 1

Topic: Corporal punishment

#### (Alliance formation between G1S1 and G1S2)

- 81 G1S4: But as you said, we can, we can... give counselling to them. But when  
82 the teachers only talk to the students after their meeting and they just...

- 84 G1S3: Get back to their old...
- 85 G1S4: They just repeat their behaviour
- 86 G1S2: I see your point. But it is better for them to repeat and then you give  
87 counselling. Then they will become a better person instead of becoming a  
88 rebellious person. Once a student becomes rebellious, it is hard to make  
89 them to become normal student, to become an obedient student. The way  
90 we are... the way we are raised up is the way we will grow in the future.  
91 Just imagine if the students... if this this corporal punishment is allowed,  
92 every school in our country... the students will become rebellious. If they  
93 become a doctor... if they become a teacher in the future, they would do the  
94 same to their students or even worse. If they are parents, they will do the  
95 same too. Because the way they are raised, is the way they will grow up in  
96 the future. Can you... did you... do you have the same point with me?
- 97 G1S1: I agree with that point.

G1S2 offers a counter-proposal using the speech act 'to counter-propose' in line 86 till 96 to the point mentioned earlier by G1S4. This invites a response from G1S1 who utilises the speech act 'to agree' using a direct agreement ("*I agree with that point*") which is also an indirect disagreement with G1S4. This indirect disagreement token utilised by G1S1 reflects her stance on the issue that she is in an agreement with G1S2. And this is an alliance formed by G1S1 with G1S2 as the agreement put her on the same side with G1S2 on the issue discussed. An alliance is thus formed between G1S1 with G1S2.

Another example of direct agreement that led to the formation of an alliance is observable in Excerpt 2.

### Excerpt 2

Topic: Corporal punishment

#### (Alliance formation between G1S4 and G1S3)

- 44 G1S3: In my opinion I think that... I agree that corporal punishment be  
45 allowed in school because I think that when teachers do corporal  
46 punishment, it's not need to waste a lot of time with verbal communication.  
47 Corporal punishment is appropriate for certain students when used in  
48 moderation, means the teacher know the.... How to do corporal  
49 punishments means not.... Means they know when not too be hard to their  
50 students. I think nowadays the students are hard-headed. Means they...  
51 When they hear the teacher give advice to the students, they just hear it and  
52 they just forget what the teacher said I think when the teacher punish the  
53 students, they will remember until they get old then they will take that  
54 lesson until their...
- 55 G1S1: But I think there are always better way to discipline students instead  
56 of do the corporal punishment. For example, we can do parents meeting to  
57 discuss about their children.
- 58 G1S4: I agree with G1S3 because when we do corporal punishment, we can  
59 make the students afraid to repeat their wrong... students should know that

60 when teacher beat them, punish them, teacher just love them. Not angry to  
61 them

G1S4 in lines 58-61 gives her response to the point of argument given by G1S1 in lines 55-57. G1S4 says she agrees with G1S3 that corporal punishment practices need to be implemented in schools. By agreeing with G1S3, G1S4 expresses her disagreement with the ideas of G1S1, albeit indirectly. G1S4 then further supports her agreement with G1S3 by using the speech act 'to justify' that corporal punishment could teach the students regarding acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in school. The agreement of G1S4 with G1S3's stance is against the stance of G1S1. An alliance is formed between G1S3 and G1S4 in managing the disagreement with G1S1.

Apart from Excerpts 1 and 2, this type of alliance formation is also shown in Excerpt 3.

### Excerpt 3

Topic: English vs Bahasa Malaysia in math and science classrooms

#### (Alliance formation between G2S2 and G2S4)

29 G2S1: I would like to get back on your opinion. Okay. Architect... in my  
30 opinion. Nowadays people can connect with each other around the world  
31 right. So, basically. Okay. On the employers. For example, the government.  
32 They also take a lot of youngsters that know bilanguage, or trilanguage, or  
33 even Multilanguages. So, we cannot only rely on using only BM as our  
34 learning medium. We need to use more language for example English.  
35 English is a better option for the students or for the youngsters to learn  
36 English and Mathematics. To learn Mathematics and Science. Okay, even  
37 though BM is more easier to understand, meaning we all can talk as our  
38 mother-tongue. But most importantly is we need to adapt well with the  
39 international environment. We cannot only rely on the local environment...  
40 local learning environment. We need to more explore outside.

41 G2S4: I strongly disagree but when you say that English should replace  
42 Bahasa Melayu as a medium of instruction in Mathematics and Science.  
43 But, that would be a total discrimination to students who are living in rural  
44 areas especially, because they can't understand what the teacher say in  
46 English especially when science terms. They can only memorise the terms  
47 but they don't know how to use and they can't understand terms' meaning  
48 and when to use.

49 G2S2: We should standardise rural and urban areas. Meaning that  
50 information can easily be transferred to them. So, there are no  
51 discrimination between rural and urban areas. I agree with you.

In Excerpt 3, G2S4 directly disagrees with G2S1 from lines 41-48. This disagreement invites G2S2 to give a response. In lines 49 -51, G2S2 utilises the speech act 'to suggest' as she counterclaims the opinion about standardisation of BM as the medium of instruction; she is in support of G2S4. This move shows that G2S2 aligns herself with G2S4 and her disagreement with G2S1 is implicit. By forming an alliance between themselves, G2S2 and G2S4 countered the point by G2S1 and the conversation among them moved on to another topic.

Apart from ratifying a disagreement turn and giving an upgraded assessment, alliances were also formed through collaboration by completing a fellow interlocutor's uncompleted turn. This is discussed in the next section.

#### 4.1.2. Collaboration Through Completing an Uncompleted Turn

Completing an uncompleted turn happens when a speaker helps another participant by orienting to the previous turn as incomplete and providing the completion of the turn. By accomplishing this, the speaker displays understanding of what another participant's intention is and acknowledges and welcomes the fact that the hearer is in fact agreeing with the previously stated position. One example of completing an uncompleted turn can be found in Excerpt 4.

#### Excerpt 4

Topic: Corporal punishment

#### (Alliance formation between G1S3 and G1S4)

- 65 G1S2: I'm sorry. But... I do agree that a more disciplined students can have a  
66 better results, right? But if the caning or the corporal punishment's  
67 consequences is leading a student to be a rebellious person or an introvert  
68 person. Wait! Just take a moment. Not every person loves to be treated in  
69 that way. There are many other ways. And why is it that the students can be  
70 a rebellious person? Once you are caned, of course you will hate the person  
71 that caned you that beat you. That makes you feel like... you are. The actions  
72 in front of others. Commonly is performed, is occurred in front of other  
73 students during the assembly. Those actions will make them feel like  
74 ashamed and they will tend to become a rebellious person. They will become  
75 more hard-headed instead of going to become a... obedient student
- 76 G1S4: but as you said, we can, we can... give counselling to them. But when  
77 the teachers only talk to the students after their meeting and they just...
- 78 G1S3: get back to their old...
- 79 G1S4: they just repeat their behaviour.

G1S4 in lines 76- 77 gives a response to the point mentioned by G1S2 (lines 65-75). She counterclaims that although counselling can be used to curb disciplinary problem among the students, it is not as effective as corporal punishment as they will be back to their old behaviours. However, this turn was not completed by herself. She pauses at the end of line 77. Then in line 78, G1S3 completes the turn by saying "*get back to their old...*" [G1S3]. This implies the ineffectiveness of counselling in curbing disciplinary punishment in schools unlike the corporal punishments. Here, she utilises the speech act 'to support' by completing the incomplete turn of G1S4 which subsequently implies disagreement against G1S1 and G1S2. Another example of collaboration through completing an uncompleted turn can also be seen in Excerpt 5.

#### Excerpt 5

Topic: Corporal punishment

#### (Alliance formation between G1S1 and G1S2)

- 103 G1S4: Teacher should talk to them before they punish them. So, they can  
104 accept what their... problem.

- 105 G1S2: Ok. Wait for a minute. Just imagine that... can you just imagine that...  
 106 for me... It is unacceptable for corporal punishment to be done in the school.  
 107 You know that (0.2)
- 108 G1S1: it can give long term effect, can impact in later years.

In lines 105- 107, G1S2 disagrees with G1S4. G1S2 responds to G1S4's opinion on the practice of corporal punishments in schools. As G1S4 conveys her claim that it should not be an issue for the teachers to enforce corporal punishments in schools as a step to curb disciplinary problems among the students, G1S2 disagrees with her. G1S2 claims that "*It is unacceptable for corporal punishment to be done in the school*". Before G1S2 could complete her turn, she pauses for two seconds. This resulted in G1S1 to complete G1S2's turn against G1S4 by saying that "*it can give long term effect, can impact in later years*". This can be classified as the speech act 'to clarify'. This clarification implies that corporal punishment can give unwanted long-term effects on students. This completion of the uncompleted turn of G1S2 by G1S1 via a clarification shows that G1S1 aligns herself with G1S2 in managing the disagreement with G1S4.

Apart from collaboration in completing an uncompleted turn, participants form alliances through collaboration in supporting a single point of disagreement using a direct agreement followed by a clarification or justification. This is discussed in the next section.

#### *4.1.3. Collaboration in Supporting a Single Point of Disagreement Using a Direct Agreement and a Clarification / Justification*

The participants made alliances in managing their disagreements using a collaboration technique through supporting a disagreement point using a direct agreement and further clarifying it using further explanation. One example of this technique of forming an alliance can be seen in Excerpt 6.

#### **Excerpt 6**

Topic: Corporal punishment

#### **(Alliance formation between G1S1 and G1S2)**

- 81 G1S4: But as you said, we can, we can... give counselling to them. But when  
 82 the teachers only talk to the students after their meeting and they just...
- 84 G1S3: Get back to their old...
- 85 G1S4: They just repeat their behaviour
- 86 G1S2: I see your point. But it is better for them to repeat and then you give  
 87 counselling. Then they will become a better person instead of becoming a  
 88 rebellious person. Once a student becomes rebellious, it is hard to make  
 89 them to become normal student, to become an obedient student. The way  
 90 we are... the way we are raised up is the way we will grow in the future.  
 91 Just imagine if the students... if this this corporal punishment is allowed,  
 92 every school in our country... the students will become rebellious. If they  
 93 become a doctor... if they become a teacher in the future, they would do the  
 94 same to their students or even worse. If they are parents, they will do the  
 95 same too. Because the way they are raised, is the way they will grow up in

96 the future. Can you... did you... do you have the same point with me?

97 G1S1: I agree with that point.

In lines 81-85 of Excerpt 6, G1S4 and G1S3 support corporal punishment practices in schools as they do not think students would behave even after they are given counselling in the place of corporal punishments. G1S4 specifically says *"they just repeat their behaviour"*. G1S2, however, does not support the implementation of corporal punishments as an effort to curb disciplinary problems in schools. In responding to G1S3 and G1S4, G1S2 claims (lines 86 - 96) that *"it is better for them to repeat and then you give counselling. Then they will become a better person instead of becoming a rebellious person. Once a student becomes rebellious, it is hard to make them to become normal student, to become an obedient student"*.

G1S2 thinks that the negative impacts of corporal punishment practices outweigh the benefits that come from it. This turn of disagreement receives support from G1S1. G1S1 supports G1S2's point by giving a direct agreement with the point of G1S2. She specifically says that *"I agree with that point."* She then continues by giving a clarification point to support her agreement point by saying that *"What like G1S2 said, the way we area raised is the way we grow. So, if student is treated with corporal punishment, it will lead the students to be... to do the same violent to other person."*

This implies that corporal punishments would only make the students get more violent in the future as corporal punishments usually inflict pain to the students as a lesson. This act of supporting the previously-mentioned point of disagreement by G1S2 against the point made by G1S3 and G1S4 shows that G1S1 aligns herself with G1S2.

Excerpt 7 is another example which depicts how two participants collaborated in supporting a single point of argument against another participant.

### Excerpt 7

Topic: English vs Bahasa Malaysia in math and science classrooms

#### (Alliance formation between G2S4 and G2S2)

103 G2S1: I have a point to argue with you. Are they feeling happy or proud when  
104 you know more than one language? They'll be happy right?

105 G2S2: But we also have Chinese, Indian, Malay, in our country. Why not we  
106 learn our national language first? We also have three language here.

107 G2S4: Because these three languages we daily in our communication.

In line 107 of Excerpt 7, G2S4 supports G2S2 in disagreeing with G2S1, who in lines 103-104 poses a question *"Are they feeling happy or proud when you know more than one language? They'll be happy right?"*. This is to invoke a point that she thinks being multilingual is better, hence, having English as the medium of instruction in math and science classes is a good thing to do. This receives a disagreement from G2S2. G2S2 uses an interrogative to disagree by questioning G2S1's earlier opinion. She poses the question *"Why not we learn our national language first?"* [G2S2]. This response receives support from G2S4 in line 107 who supports G2S2 using a justification point. She says *"because these three languages we daily in our communication"* [G2S4]. This justification supports the point made by G2S4, showing her alliance with G2S2 in arguing against G2S1.

#### 4.1.4. Seeking for An Agreement

Another pattern found in the data by which disagreement is managed is when an interlocutor seeks for an agreement about a point of view from the rest of the group members. Excerpt 8 displays an example.

##### Excerpt 8

Topic: Corporal punishment

##### (Alliance formation between G1S1 and G1S2)

- 81 G1S4: But as you said, we can, we can... give counselling to them. But when  
82 the teachers only talk to the students after their meeting and they just...
- 84 G1S3: Get back to their old...
- 85 G1S4: They just repeat their behaviour
- 86 G1S2: I see your point. But it is better for them to repeat and then you give  
87 counselling. Then they will become a better person instead of becoming a  
88 rebellious person. Once a student becomes rebellious, it is hard to make  
89 them to become normal student, to become an obedient student. The way  
90 we are... the way we are raised up is the way we will grow in the future.  
91 Just imagine if the students... if this this corporal punishment is allowed,  
92 every school in our country... the students will become rebellious. If they  
93 become a doctor... if they become a teacher in the future, they would do the  
94 same to their students or even worse. If they are parents, they will do the  
95 same too. Because the way they are raised, is the way they will grow up in  
96 the future. Can you... did you... do you have the same point with me?
- 97 G1S1: I agree with that point. What like S2 said, the way we are raised is  
98 the way we grow. So, if student is treated with corporal punishment, it will  
99 lead the student to be... to... to do the same violent to other persons.

As observed in Excerpt 8, G1S2 in lines 86-91 disagrees with the point presented by G1S4 and G1S3 (lines 81 - 85). At the end of her turn, G1S2 asks G1S1 whether or not G1S1 agrees with her point by saying "*do you have the same point with me?*". G1S1 (lines 97-99) replies by conveying her agreement with G1S2's point. The use of the speech act 'to agree' and 'to assert' reflects an establishment of alliance with G1S2 while conveying her disagreement with G1S3 and G1S4.

Excerpt 9 displays another example of how an alliance is made when a speaker seeks an agreement from other participants in the same discussion as a way to manage disagreement.

##### Excerpt 9

Topic: Skill vs experience in hiring new workers

##### (Alliance formation between G3S2 and G3S1)

- 1 G3S1: So, the question give is "which is more important in hiring an  
2 employee? Skills or experience? So, in my opinion I think experienced  
3 people tend to do less mistake because they learn a lot from their  
4 experience. They learn from their mistake. Do you guys agree with me?

5 G3S2: In my opinion, I agree that... hiring people with the... lot of  
 6 experience is more benefit to a company because experienced employees  
 7 already know the working culture. They already know how the pressure it  
 8 will be... so, they will have a fair idea about how to cope the pressure...  
 9 and it will be see at the positive side. They will feel they are the employees  
 10 to also have positive mentality in order to cope with the pressure. They will  
 11 be a model to the other employees.

As can be noticed in lines 1-4 of Excerpt 9, G3S1 conveys her opinion that she thinks employers tend to recruit experienced workers over less experienced but skilled ones. She ends her turn with a question seeking for agreement from her interlocutors, *"Do you guys agree with me?"*.

G3S2 gives her agreement in the succeeding turn (lines 5-11), creating an alignment with G3S1. The speech acts 'to agree' and 'to assert' by G3S1 reflects the establishment of an alliance with G3S2.

## 5. Discussion

In managing disagreement in group discussions, the participants in this study demonstrated how team alliance can be strategic in managing disagreements among peers in group discussion. This was done using different discourse strategies which can be classified as ratifying a disagreement turn and giving an upgraded assessment, collaborating by completing an uncompleted turn, collaborating in supporting a single point of disagreement using direct agreement supported with clarification/justification, and seeking for agreement.

Forming alliances as a way to manage disagreement is supported by [Kangasharju \(2002\)](#) who points out that in disagreement talk participants can act as representatives of a team and form team alliance as a way to manage the disagreement. This finding is also in tandem with [Fujimoto \(2012\)](#), [Doehler and Pochon-Berger \(2011\)](#), and [Bardovi-Harlig and Salsbury \(2004\)](#), all of whom have pointed out that in team alliance, participants act as representatives of a team.

The management of disagreement through formation of team alliance among group members can be said to be reflective of the Malay culture. According to [Paramasivam \(2007\)](#) Malays tend to be indirect when speaking, preferring to 'go around' when addressing disagreement, as an act of maintaining harmony. This is similar to the findings by [Maros and Rosli \(2017\)](#) and [Awang, Zakaria, and Razak \(2021\)](#) who explain that Malays tend to avoid direct disagreement and practiced being friendly like seeking for agreement in the form of questions. In Asian cultures, the emphasis on politeness results in indirect ways of communicating as a means for collaboration and cooperation. The way the participants in this study form alliances among themselves instead of directly disagreeing can be said to be a reflection of Malay culture that emphasises self-restraint in the face of social conflict to alleviate conflicts in the occurrence of disagreement ([Paramasivam, 2007](#); [Maros & Rosli, 2017](#); [Awang, Zakaria, & Razak, 2021](#)).

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings of this study can benefit teaching and learning in the ESL setting. This is based on the findings that intermediate ESL learners' pragmatic competence in terms of their alliance making process was done through speech acts together with discourse strategies. A call for future research could perhaps focus on advanced Malaysian ESL learners and compare how alliances are made during disagreement in group discussion by advanced learners in comparison to intermediate learners.

Apart from that, the learners' alliance making processes were done through speech acts and discourse strategies. These speech acts and discourse strategies are teachable. In specific, indirect discourse strategies that allow for formation of alliances as observed in this study can be taught to students as part of the effort to increase their pragmatic awareness in communication. This provides implication to language courses suggesting that the focus on the development of pragmatic competence among students can be added as one of the objectives of ESL/EFL programs and courses.

Most significantly, teachers should be aware that their ESL/EFL students' already have pragmatic awareness. This could be due to the influence of their first language pragmatic knowledge as well as their earlier ESL/EFL levels of education. However, more effort should be made in language programs and courses, particularly at the higher levels, to build and strengthen their pragmatic ability. Group discussion activities have the potential to be used to benefit students in developing students' pragmatic competence. This is evidently reflected in the ways the ESL learners in this study strategically formed alliances through speech acts and discourse strategies when managing their disagreement.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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