

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Learning English outside the Classroom

As stated earlier, Maria has been studying English for many years, and while in secondary school she needed to study other subjects, such as math and science, in English as well. She does not feel, though, that her English improved that much while at secondary school, and she believes that the teaching methods employed there, “learning things by heart” as she put it, grammar work and drills, were not very effective. She then studied English at a learning center, where the teachers were mainly Burmese or Karen, although native speakers also occasionally taught there, and most of the lessons were in English. It is when she was studying at the learning center that Maria feels that she became substantially more competent in English. She believes that the main reason for this improvement, though, was due to the fact that she was reading many short stories in English at that time. She reports that initially she started reading short stories mainly to help improve her English but partly because they seemed to be enjoyable and interesting. Later on, though, she read stories for the enjoyment of it, and reading to improve her English ceased to be a conscious goal. The first story books she read were simplified detective stories, such as Sherlock Holmes books, which she borrowed from the British Council library, of which she was a member. As she could easily find these books in English, together with the fact that part of the motivation to read them was to improve her English, she did not look for Burmese versions of them.

Another thing she does that she feels has helped her improve her English is watch English films. She insists, though, that she does not watch these films with the express intention of furthering her knowledge of English. The main reason she watches these films is that she finds them interesting and exciting. She says that while she was in Myanmar, none of the films she wanted to watch were dubbed into Burmese or had Burmese subtitles, and so if she wanted to watch them, she had to watch them in English. She used to watch these films with English subtitles, but acting on the advice of one of her teachers, she now tries to watch them without subtitles. She finds that it is easier to understand the films when watching them with subtitles, and that watching them without subtitles can be tiring. Nowadays, her decision to watch a movie with or without subtitles depends on many factors, including her mood and how tired she is.

In addition to watching films, she also likes listening to and singing along with English songs. So that she can sing along with them, she often searches the Internet and finds the lyrics for songs that she particularly likes. Again the motivation for listening to English songs is for enjoyment, and there is little conscious intent to do so to improve her English, although she does feel that her English has improved as a result of listening to these songs.

When she first came to Thailand, she used to keep a diary in English. She says that her main motivation at that time was just to write something, although she was aware of the fact that it would probably help her English, as her teachers had previously encouraged her to keep a diary. Another reason for using English was that she felt more comfortable writing in English, especially when expressing her feelings. She says that she tended to feel embarrassed when she wrote about her feelings in

Burmese, but that she did not feel the same when writing in English. Again, she feels that her English has improved as a result of writing a diary.

It was only after coming to Thailand that Maria learned how to use the Internet. Soon after arriving, she wanted to be able to contact her family and friends by email, and asked a friend of hers to set up an account for her. A few weeks later, after hearing about Yahoo mail, she set up a Yahoo email account herself by following the instructions on the screen. She also needed to use the Internet to do research for an assignment she was given. For the assignment she had to give a presentation about a country. The teacher did not specify how the research should be conducted, and this made it less worrying for Maria, as she did not have to use the Internet. She did, in fact, use book sources as well as the Internet for this assignment. She was also helped by a friend, who told her that she could do the research by using the Yahoo website and explained how to use it.

With regard to chatting, Maria saw a friend chatting on a public chat site one day, and as it seemed like fun, she wanted to try it. Her friend helped her log on to the site, and Maria says that she soon became “addicted” to it. Her friends have also helped her learn how to use chat since then. She says that any time that she does not understand a particular abbreviation or emoticon, she can always find out what it means by asking a friend. Nowadays, she does not use a public chat room; she just uses instant messaging. Although she started chatting because it was fun rather than to improve her English, she did make a conscious decision to use English once she had started chatting, realizing that it would be good for her English. This also meant that, although she felt that she was just “wasting her time,” she could justify using chat to herself, in the knowledge that it would be of benefit to her. There were several other reasons, though, for her use of English. At that time, she felt more comfortable

speaking English and felt that she could express herself better in English than in Burmese. She also had difficulty understanding Burghish, that is, Burmese using the ASCII character set, and Burmese fonts were not always available. In addition to the lack of fonts, she was not used to typing in Burmese then, although this is something that she has been doing more often recently. She feels that her ability to communicate and type in English has improved as a result of using chat.

Contrary to the other activities mentioned, such as reading, watching films and listening to songs, choosing to chat in English presupposes that one's interlocutors can understand and communicate in English. Fortunately for Maria, she had several friends who were very good at English, and she thinks that chatting with them helped her learn new vocabulary.

Although Maria has engaged in many activities that have helped her become a proficient speaker of English, she has done so for various reasons, not simply to learn English. Indeed, with most of these activities learning English seems to have been a lesser motive, or even an unintended consequence, of her actions. In the case of reading stories, although the initial motive was mainly to learn English, this aspect became less important as she read more, and reading English stories became increasingly motivated by the fact that she found them enjoyable and interesting. As for watching films, listening to songs and chatting, their contribution to her improving her English seems to be, to a large extent, an unintended consequence of these actions. There is an awareness, though, that the way she engages with these media can affect the extent to which they benefit her English. This awareness is reflected in Maria's desire to watch films without subtitles, believing that this will help improve her listening ability. Each time she watches a film, though, this desire is mediated by emotional and physiological factors, so if she is too tired or not in the right mood, she

will watch the film with English subtitles, which she finds makes comprehension easier.

She has been helped by the fact that English is such a dominant language in today's world, and that Burmese is not well represented in popular media and on the Internet. As a result, it has been easier for her to find English, rather than Burmese, materials that interest her. There is a danger, though, of reifying these social and material conditions that have been so beneficial to her and forgetting, in de Certeau's terms, the 'ways of using' these conditions, that is, how she has interpreted and enacted them. The same conditions could also serve to exclude people who do not feel confident in their ability to understand English.

The ways Maria has engaged with these various activities seem to be central to an understanding of her learning outside the classroom. Although she has had a significant amount of exposure to English, the benefits she has gained from this exposure appear to have depended largely on the level of her engagement with this environment. For example, with regard to watching English movies, according to Maria, there are many people in Burma who watch them without understanding them verbally. Maria, on the other hand, decided that she wanted to understand them on a deeper level, and it is unlikely that the gains that she seems to have made as a result of this activity would have been possible otherwise. In addition, she continues to engage with these movies in ways that she feels will benefit her English, by watching them without subtitles, for example. Maria seems to be aware that there are various ways of engaging with activities like watching movies, listening to songs, reading, and chatting, and the way she engages with them can affect what opportunities these activities offer her. An example of this is the way she has used chatting and how her use of the technology has varied over time.

4.2 Use of Chat

4.2.1 Personalization of Technology

In this study, no comparison was made between the way Maria has used chat and the way other people have, or how Maria's use of chat differs from the way it was intended to be used. However, it is possible to compare how she has used it in different contexts, and it is clear that she has, at various times, used chat for many different purposes: for fun, to contact friends and family, as a learning tool, to help stimulate her when she is bored, and to contact people who can console her when she is sad or lonely. It seems that Maria has been particularly adept at unlocking the potential of this technology according to her needs, and as her needs changed, for example, when she wanted to practice typing in Burmese rather than English, she was able to find a way of using chat that allowed her to satisfy these new desires.

Focusing on the ways Maria has used chat, rather than simply looking at the specifications of the associated technologies, provides a more dynamic view of chat and emphasizes that the opportunities a technology offers need to be unlocked, or enacted, by knowledgeable agents. It also shows us how she has integrated chat into her life. Because of this integration, understanding her use of chat necessarily involves gaining an understanding of the context in which she uses it, both the narrow context, which includes specific needs and her mood, and the broader context, particularly the status of English in Maria's social world and the fact that she was living abroad, separate from her family and many of her friends.

4.2.2 Emotions and Second Languages

As stated earlier, Maria used English when writing her diary partly because she felt more comfortable expressing herself in that language, and that she found writing about her feelings in Burmese embarrassing. Several authors have noted that

when speaking a second language, many people are more distant and less emotional, a phenomenon known as the 'L2 detachment effect' (Bond & Lai, 1986; Dewaele, 2004; Koven, 2006; Pavlenko, 2005; Vaid, 2006). According to Bond and Lai (1986), this detachment is due to the fact that second languages are usually acquired in “more emotionally neutral settings than are first languages” (p. 179). As a result, second language words will cause less arousal. Gutfreund (1990), however, argues that it might be due to a difference in the norms concerning the expression of emotions in the two, or more, languages. He found that both English-Spanish bilinguals and Spanish-English bilinguals answered with significantly greater affect when they were speaking Spanish.

The following exchange occurs in a conversation between Maria and Kyaw Kyaw, a male friend of hers.

1. Maria: I am so *sate nyit* these days. [sad, depressed]
2. 4:53 PM Kyaw: how come?
3. Maria: I hang out with friends and I laugh most of the time.
4. but I am still *sate nyit*. [sad, depressed]

(chat retrieved 9 July, 2009; emphases added).

Although the conversation is almost exclusively in English, Maria seems to feel happier describing her feelings in Burmese rather than English. She feels that the term *sate nyit* (sad or depressed) expresses her feelings better, or is more immediate, than the equivalent English term. It is also important that her interlocutor understands, not only intellectually but also emotionally, what it is that she wants to say, and so in this case, the Burmese term is more appropriate. It seems clear that, for Maria, English expressions feel more distant than Burmese ones. The reason for this distance, though, is unclear. It might be because English is her second language, but it might

also be due to a difference in the extent to which emotions are generally expressed in the respective languages.

4.2.3 Choosing a Chat Partner and Chat Norms

In general, choosing a chat partner is usually constrained by the availability of that person and the ability of both people to communicate with each other, which is sometimes constrained by a lack of fonts, or the participants' insufficient communicative skill in a particular language. In Maria's case, if she wants to chat in English or Burmese, her chat partner needs to be able to understand the chosen language, but there is an additional problem if she wants to chat in Burmese. Both Maria's computer and her interlocutor's computer would need to have Burmese fonts installed for them to communicate successfully. These constraints, though, still leave her with many possible chat partners as there are many people, and various kinds of friends, or acquaintances, on her contacts list. Maria has two email/chat accounts, and most of the people on her contacts list in the one account are people that she does not know in real life, and many of them are people that she does not know at all. This is due to the fact that some of her contacts share her email address with their friends, who then send Maria an invite to talk, and once she accepts this invitation, they are then put on her contacts list. As a result, Maria has a wide choice of potential chat partners.

There are times when Maria uses chat to keep in touch with her family and friends, and there are also occasions, for example, when she is sad or bored, when her reasons for using chat depend largely on her mood, and this, in turn, affects her choice of interlocutor. When she is sad, she usually chats with someone she knows well, a real-life or virtual friend, and who she knows will give her good advice. She says she has several virtual friends, friends that she has not met in real life, who she has been

chatting with for several years and who she feels she can trust. Maria thinks that it is sometimes the case that she can communicate more frankly with these virtual friends than her real-life friends. She sometimes feels more comfortable expressing her feelings to someone that she trusts but will not meet. When Maria is bored, though, she sometimes likes chatting with people she has not contacted before. Although it is customary to start the conversation with information about age, sex and location when chatting with someone for the first time, Maria likes chatting without doing this when she is bored. She often starts such a conversation with a joke, and the conversation will continue with hardly any personal information being exchanged. She feels that this type of chat is perhaps more liberating than other types of chatting, and therefore, depending on her mood, more enjoyable.

Although chatting with a person for the first time can be enjoyable, it is often not successful. If the interlocutors introduce themselves with information about their age, sex and location, there are times when one of them will simply stop chatting because he or she does not want to talk with that type of person. Gender seems to be very important when deciding whether or not to chat with a certain person. It seems that many people want to chat either only with women or only with men and will immediately terminate the conversation, without saying goodbye, if the interlocutor is not of the desired gender. When asked if she thinks this is rude, Maria said that she does not feel it is rude if the interlocutors hardly know each other. It would be rude, however, if they had had several conversations in the past and then signed off without saying goodbye, or an equivalent expression. According to Maria, therefore, the norms governing how someone ends a conversation vary according to the context of the relationship between the interlocutors, or how this relationship is defined. As stated earlier, Maria sometimes likes chatting with people that she does not know

without telling them her age, sex and location. In these cases, Maria tends to terminate the conversation if her chat partner keeps on asking her for this information. Similarly, Maria does not like to tell anyone her name unless she has been chatting with that person for some time, and so if her interlocutor keeps on asking her what her name is, she quickly ends the conversation.

4.3 Agency and the Language Used in Chat

4.3.1 Meaning, Norms and Power

In this section, I will look at how meaning, norms and power interpenetrate in interaction (Giddens, 1984, 1993), while focusing on the chatting norms with regard to silences and anonymity. For norms to apply, not only do actors need to be aware of the prevailing norms, but they also need to be able to interpret, or define, the situations they encounter and, if necessary, be able to enforce sanctions. The norms regarding silences and anonymity when chatting seem to differ from those for face-to-face interaction, in spite of the many similarities between the two media. In face-to-face interaction, silences between turns, even short ones, are usually interpreted as being meaningful (Robert, Francis, & Morgan, 2006; Schegloff, Ochs, & Thompson, 1996; Sifianou, 1997; Sorjonen, 1996; Watts, 1997). With chatting, though, there seem to be many times when long silences, lasting several minutes, are tolerated. This norm, though, depends on how the silences are interpreted, which, in turn, depends on an interpretation of the interaction. With regard to anonymity, it is only in exceptional circumstances that visual anonymity is achieved in face-to-face interaction, whereas it is presupposed by the nature of text-based CMC. In addition, in all but the most casual face-to-face interactions, names are exchanged, and it is not common for

obviously false names to be used. In synchronous CMC, though, account names are often used, and the interlocutors tend to be more hesitant about revealing their names.

In the following two examples, there were several long silences during the conversations between Maria and her friends which were not considered to be meaningful. In the following conversation between Maria and her friend Kyaw Kyaw, there are two lengthy silences, neither of which are commented upon by the two interlocutors.

1. Maria: Ko Kyaw Kyaw
2. Kyaw: byar [yes]
3. 14 minutes
4. 3:53 PM Maria: my computer is infected with spyware.
5. so, i lost all the songs.
6. can I copy the songs that i got from the bmp from you later?
7. 3:54 PM Kyaw: why not
8. Maria: ok... thanks
9. 3:55 PM Kyaw: what do u want for ur bd? [bd=birthday]
10. 3:57 PM Maria: nothing special'
11. 3:58 PM Kyaw: dar so bar ma, ma wel pay dot buu naw [then I will not buy anything for you]
12. Maria: that is fine. :) [smiling]
13. Kyaw: thanks
14. Maria: :) [smiling]
15. 20 minutes
16. 4:19 PM Maria: no class?
17. 4:20 PM Kyaw: i'm in class now

(chat retrieved 9 July, 2009).

Both silences (lines 3 and 15) come after the completion of recognizable sequences. Before the first silence, Maria greets Kyaw Kyaw and he replies to the greeting, and before the second silence, they have finished discussing what Maria wants, or does not want, for her birthday. After the second silence, they chatted continuously for a further 43 minutes, and neither person felt any need to explain why there were these two gaps in the conversation. With chatting, the nature of the medium means that, unlike face-to-face interaction, users can have multiple dyadic conversations at the same time, and if they are busy chatting with several other people, gaps might appear in some of the conversations they are having. During both of the silences quoted above, for example, Maria was chatting, and trying to set up a voicemail connection, with her sister. The fact that these gaps were accepted in this conversation suggests that both interlocutors interpreted these silences as indicating that the other party was busy, and that being the case, as fitting within the norms for the use of chat. This provides an example of how the use of interpretative schemes and norms intertwine in interaction. The silences needed to be interpreted before a judgment on how appropriate they were could be made.

In the next example, the silence comes after a question, that is, while Maria is still waiting for an answer.

1. 3:28 PM Thazin: mi mar [Mar is short for Maria]
2. Maria: yes?
3. 3:29 PM Thazin: I got your text
4. anything?
5. 3:30 PM Maria: have u seen the invitation card?
6. 5 minutes

7. 3:35 PM Maria: pls come to . . . my birday party on Friday at Ma Sarah's house

(chat retrieved 9 July, 2009).

Maria seems to interpret this silence as meaning that Thazin is too busy to reply at the moment. Instead of repeating her question, as she might have done in face-to-face talk, she simply delivers her main message, the invitation to her party. After line 6, Maria asks Thazin to invite some other people, but Thazin makes no further contribution to the conversation. Although Thazin does not even acknowledge Maria's requests, Maria did not repeat them, presumably because she knew that Thazin had a record of the conversation, as it was written down and so less ephemeral than spoken discourse.

In the two examples quoted above, the silences seem to have been interpreted as merely indicating that the interlocutor was busy and were not seen as being meaningful. Not all silences, though, are viewed in the same way. In the following exchange, which is the beginning of the first time Maria and Ei chatted with each other, there is a short silence, less than a minute, between lines 12 and 13, which appears to have been interpreted as being significant by Ei. This exchange also provides an example of the interlacing of meaning, norms and power, and how structures, in this case regarding the propriety of preserving one's anonymity, are negotiated and contested.

1. 03:45 Ei: hi who are u pls???
2. Maria: littlepony
3. Ei: aww
4. i mean real name
5. 03:47 can u tell or not>>

6. Maria: littlepony
7. Ei: aww
8. Maria: you don't know me.
9. and I don't know you too.
10. Ei: yes of course
11. 03:48 but i am sure i don't do anything with your name
12. so don't worry ok???
13. 03:49 ok if u don't want to tell
14. it's ok
15. 03:50 Maria: thanks for your understanding.
16. Ei: nvm [never mind]
17. Maria: I didn't mean to be rude. (if i was rude to you.)
18. Ei: if u don't like i don't asked to u
19. don't worry
20. i am not angry to anyone
21. 03:51 Maria: I just don't feel comfortable telling my name here.
22. okay
23. thank you
24. Ei: ok ok nvm [never mind]
25. i just asked
26. nothing really
27. Maria: I don't know how we got connected here. Do you have any idea?
28. Ei: nope
29. Maria: I see

(chat retrieved 9 May, 2009).

As it is the first time that Maria has chatted with Ei, Maria does not want to reveal her name. However, it seems that Ei would prefer to know her interlocutor's name and after being told Maria's account name, explicitly asks for her real name in line 4. In line 5, though, she acknowledges that Maria might not want to give her this information, showing that she recognizes that some people prefer to remain anonymous when chatting. Maria reaffirms her reluctance to divulge her identity by simply restating her account name, and then pointing out that they do not know each other, thereby implying that it is not appropriate for Ei to ask Maria her name at this point in time. In lines 11 and 12, Ei makes a further attempt to find out Maria's name, but between lines 12 and 13, she changes her mind and accepts that Maria is not yet ready to tell her her name. It is unclear exactly how long the gap is between lines 12 and 13, but in this case, the silence might have been interpreted as an indication that Maria might soon terminate the conversation. Contrary to the two examples of silences quoted above, which were in conversations between friends, this silence occurs at the beginning of the first conversation between Maria and Ei, and at a critical juncture in the conversation, and this might lead Ei to be more sensitive to the negative connotations of any silences. Ei's comments in lines 13 and 14 do not conclude the matter, though; there is an extended discussion until line 26, in which Maria tries to explain her reluctance to divulge her name and Ei reassures her that she accepts Maria's decision. During this exchange, neither person has access to the nonverbal cues that might help them understand how the other person feels. In addition, neither person uses emoticons, or quasi-nonverbal cues, either. It is only later in the conversation, presumably when the two interlocutors felt more comfortable about chatting with each other, that they started using emoticons (see pp. 70-71).

At the heart of the above exchange is a negotiation about how their interaction is to be defined, which centers around the extent to which Maria and Ei feel they can trust each other. This definition, in turn, interrelates with the norms surrounding chat use and the power that each interlocutor has to advance her position. In the first interview with Maria, she stated that when chatting with people for the first time, she is often asked her name, which suggests that some people are quite happy to reveal their name at this early stage in the relationship. However, as Maria is able to chat with many people without revealing her name, it also seems that it is understood that some people might not be comfortable about revealing their name so early. Ei's comments in lines 5 and 11 to 14 show that she is aware of this, and in line 11, we see that she understands why some people might want to remain anonymous. She still asks Maria for her real name three times, though, while trying to reassure her that she can be trusted. At the same time, Maria indirectly tells Ei three times that she will not divulge her name, each time stating her case more forcefully. She does not say so directly until line 21, though, which is after Ei has agreed to not insisting on knowing her name. In lines 2, 6, 8 and 9, by stating her case indirectly, Maria suggests that she does not know Ei well enough to be able to trust her and, according to chat norms, can remain anonymous. Maria also makes it clear that she will not back down from this position. Ei, on the other hand, argues that this is an interaction between two people who can trust each other and, drawing on norms, attempts to counter Maria's position. Ei reluctantly accepts Maria's decision, as she seems to realize that Maria would rather terminate the conversation than change her mind.

In this opening exchange, especially in lines 1 to 14, Maria and Ei display a sophisticated practical knowledge of how to use English, which is intimately related to a knowledge of norms and power relations. As Maria prefers to tell Ei indirectly

that she wishes to remain anonymous, Ei has to look beyond a context-free reading of the words written in lines 2, 6, 8 and 9 and understand what Maria is trying to achieve with these words. It is only then that she can understand the semantic difference between lines 2 and 6, for example. In lines 4 and 5, Ei shows that she recognizes two different interpretations of line 2. One interpretation is that Maria misunderstood Ei's question in line 1, and the other one is that Maria does not want to reveal her name. By simply restating her account name in line 6, Maria confirms the latter interpretation, and then in lines 8 and 9, she provides a rationalization of her position. Even though Maria has not explicitly stated her case, Ei seems to be aware of how Maria feels about revealing her name, and judging by her comments in lines 11 to 14, she senses that the conversation has reached a critical juncture, and because of this, she stops asking Maria for her name.

According to Giddens (1979), in social theory, power is often either underemphasized or is presented as a noxious phenomenon, associated with clearly asymmetrical power relations, which could possibly be transcended in a future society. In this opening exchange between Maria and Ei, though, in which there is no clear power differential between them, an understanding of the evolving power dynamic between them is central to the success of the negotiation, and both of them use, and interpret, language on the basis of this understanding. The ability to exercise power is central to the success of everyday actions such as this, where an action depends on the agency of others. However, the exercising of power does not occur in a vacuum; it is inseparable from the accessing of meaning and norms. Maria manages to enroll Ei in her project by drawing on norms and advancing a certain interpretation of their relationship. Ei accepts Maria's position based partly on her own knowledge of norms, but also based on her beliefs about the power that Maria has to disrupt Ei's

main goal, which is to chat with someone. Although Ei could not convince Maria to change her mind, she could manage to have the conversation continue, a result which benefited both participants.

4.3.2 Greetings and Framing

In this section, I will look at the process whereby situations are interpreted and defined, or framed, by the participants, focusing on how the interlocutors come to an understanding of how they relate to each other.

When chatting using instant messaging, Maria is able to see a contacts list which shows which of her contacts are online and available, and which are online but busy, at that time. To initiate a conversation with one of the contacts, she needs to send him or her a message, and if the recipient is free to talk then, he or she will reply. In several of the chat transcripts that I examined, these conversations started with the initiator of the conversation 'calling out' the recipient's name, most of the time in Burghish. In the following example, Maria is starting a conversation with a male friend who is a bit older than her.

1. Maria: Ko Kyaw Kyaw
2. Kyaw: byar [yes]

(chat retrieved 9 July, 2009).

Maria uses the honorific prefix 'Ko' when addressing her friend. Ko is used when talking to a man who is older than the speaker and is sometimes translated as 'elder brother', although in practice this kind of term would simply not be used in English. According to research into the use of honorifics in Japanese, honorifics can be used to foreground salient information about the relationship between the interlocutors (Rose & Kasper, 2001; Watanabe, 1993). In this case, use of the term

'ko' helps to define the relationship between Maria and Kyaw Kyaw, which, in turn, frames the situation, a conversation between a man or a woman and an older man.

In the next example, a female friend is starting a conversation with Maria.

1. Thazin: mi mar [Mar is short for Maria]
2. Maria: yes?

(chat retrieved 9 July, 2009).

In this case, the honorific prefix 'Mi' is used. This is an affectionate term, which is usually used by an older person to a younger woman, and which could be translated as 'younger sister'. Again, the use of the honorific helps to define the relationship between Maria and Thazin, a close relationship with Thazin being older than Maria, and thereby frame the situation.

Whereas the two previous examples were from conversations between Maria and friends of her, the following one is from the conversation between Maria and Ei, that is, between two people who do not know each other. This section comes immediately after the initial exchange quoted earlier, in which Maria was refusing to divulge her real name.

1. Ei: but i can be u r friend
2. i mean if u want
3. 03:52 Maria: why not? :) [smiling]
4. Ei: thanks
5. Maria: :) [smiling]
6. Ei: ok u r girl right??? :D [laughing]
7. hello
8. 03:53 right or not???
9. Maria: yes I am.

10. 03:54 and you are a girl too.
11. Ei: good
12. Maria: is it right?
13. Ei: of course
14. Maria: yeah....I can see that in your gmail.
15. :D [laughing]
16. so, where are you from?
17. Ei: good :D [laughing]
18. and how about u r age???
19. 03:55 Maria: going to be 21 soon
20. you?
21. Ei: i c
22. i am younger than u
23. yes of course i am only 16
24. Maria: ohhhh
25. Ei: and i am just finish matriculation exam
26. Maria: you are my little sister then.
27. Ei: may b
28. but i can be your sister

(chat retrieved 9 May, 2009).

In this part of their conversation, when Maria and Ei are starting to get to know each other, they exchange information, about gender and age, that they feel they need to know in order to be able to pursue the conversation further. Once they have this information, they can define the situation as a conversation between two young women, one of whom is a bit younger than the other one. Ei is Maria's 'little sister', or

in other words, if they were talking Burmese, Maria could use the honorific 'Mi' when referring to Ei. Maria and Ei invest a considerable amount of time establishing this interpretation of their relationship, which suggests that they consider this to be an important process, in which gender and age are key variables, that provides a basis for future talk.

There are times, though, as stated earlier, when Maria chats with people without exchanging any personal information, such as age or gender, at all. In these cases, the fact that personal information is not exchanged does not mean that the situations are left undefined, though. It seems that the very absence of information helps define these situations as less serious exchanges, and this might explain why Maria finds them liberating and enjoyable.

4.3.3 Gender, Humor, and a Feel for the Game

Whereas the previous section dealt with how the relationship between the interlocutors was interpreted, or defined, in this section, I will look at how important this knowledge is for the success of the interaction. In the following exchange, which is between Maria and John, a male friend of hers, both parties use their knowledge of the relationship between them, including their respective genders, and the prevailing social norms to use, and interpret, humor. This humorous exchange also exemplifies Bourdieu's notion of practical logic, or a 'feel for the game'.

1. 2:38 PM Maria: have internet?
2. John: yeah i bough one
3. Maria: good
4. 2:40 PM John: good what
5. Maria: good to have the internet at home
6. John: yap

7. can watch porn
8. 2:41 PM can study at home
9. can play game
10. so cool
11. Maria: dirty man
12. John: he he tabarwa bel lay har [(laughing) it is natural]
13. bar dirty lel [not dirty]

(chat retrieved 9 July, 2009).

Vaid (2006) describes humor as a mode of discourse that is “playful and often irreverent” (p. 153), this irreverence usually involving the challenging, or stretching, of norms, either social, conversational or linguistic (Martin, 2007; Ross, 1998). When engaging in this mode of discourse, tacit assumptions about the world can be overturned, taboo subjects can be discussed, and obscenities or nonsense words can be used. As norms are both context-dependent and inseparable from interpretative schemes, what constitutes a challenging of norms depends, at least partly, on the situation, and how the situation is defined. In this case, John's comment about being able to watch pornography needs to be viewed in the context of a conversation between a young man and a young woman who are friends with each other. Pornography would not be considered to be an appropriate subject for conversation in most male-female discourse, not only because it is taboo, but also as it is commonly believed to be a male-dominated arena, made by and for men (Kjørholt & Sørensen, 2006; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2006; Mackay, 2001), and so of little interest to women. By introducing such a topic, and thereby breaking conversational norms, John intends to shock Maria with this joke.

Although John's intention is to shock Maria, he obviously does not want to offend her, or say something that would have an adverse effect on their relationship. He must, therefore, make a judgment about the extent to which he can stretch the norms. Although humor of this kind is meant to be funny, it can also provoke extreme, even violent, negative reactions (Bell, 2007; Lammers, 2004; Ross, 1998). For example, a fight broke out at a London club when the comedian Keith Allen pushed the boundaries of propriety too far with the following joke: "Bobby Sands [IRA hunger striker] says to Peter Sutcliffe [Yorkshire 'Ripper'], 'I bet I've had more hot dinners than you've had women'" (Ross, 1998, p. 104). There is always the possibility that jokes of this kind, ones that have an element of shock value in them, will cause offense. John's joke, then, if it misfires, could potentially have a negative impact on his relationship with Maria. In Bourdieu's terms, it is a move played for high stakes. If the joke is to be effective, John needs to successfully anticipate how Maria will react to it, and this requires a sophisticated knowledge of aspects of Maria's personality, her beliefs, her temperament, and so on, the relationship between John and Maria, and prevailing norms. According to Bourdieu (1990), this ability to anticipate the upcoming future emerges as a result of an individual's durable immersion in social life. By engaging in discernibly similar practices in the past, actors develop a 'feel for the game', a tacit understanding of how these practices are likely to proceed.

However, even though John has most probably been in similar situations in the past and can anticipate Maria's likely reaction, he cannot know for certain how she will react beforehand, as each situation varies according to its context. In addition, it is arguably more difficult for John to gauge Maria's mood in this case, when they are chatting on the Internet, because he has no access to the visual clues that would be

available in face-to-face interaction. Knowing that his knowledge of Maria's reaction is probable rather than perfect, he tries to soften the effect of his joke in line 7 by mentioning two other things an Internet connection allows him to do. This gives Maria the opportunity to ignore line 7 and respond to the information given in line 8 or 9, if she wishes to do so. Although Maria's response, in line 11, initially appears to be negative, John does not interpret it as being a strong rebuke and continues to joke about pornography in lines 12 and 13. He seems to view line 11 as an expected, conformist response, one of mild disapproval that both reflects and reaffirms the generalized belief referred to earlier that pornography is not for women.

After line 13, John rationalizes his action by explaining, in Burglish, that he is telling Maria this because she is his 'sister' and that he would not tell a potential girlfriend this. This indicates that he is aware that his joke only works in certain situations, and that the relationship between the interlocutors is central to the understanding of his comment. This does not mean, though, that his comment could only be possible in such a context. One could imagine that the comment about being able to watch pornography could be made in a conversation between two men, or between two women, or it could even be made by a woman to a man. However, the comment would arguably be interpreted differently, and the motivation for making the remark would be different, in any of the above contexts. If such a remark was made as a joke by a woman to a man, for example, she would be shocking her interlocutor by inverting, rather than reinforcing, the beliefs about the use of pornography as well as challenging the norms for mixed-sex conversations.

After John explains why he told the joke, Maria signals that she is bored with the topic of conversation and tries to change the subject. John acquiesces to the change of subject and then makes another joke, but this time in Burglish.

1. Maria: dirty
2. whatever
3. I am going to the bathroom.
4. be back
5. 2:43 PM John: for what
6. 2:47 PM hey chii par lo pi bi lar? [Have you finished having a crap yet?]

(chat retrieved 9 July, 2009).

In this part of the exchange, after repeating the remark that John is 'dirty', she uses the term 'whatever' seemingly to indicate that she is tired of the present topic of conversation. This is another indication that Maria has developed a sophisticated knowledge of how to use English to achieve certain objectives. It is unclear, though, whether it was the use of the term 'whatever' or Maria's comment about going to the bathroom that was enough to encourage John to change the subject, but the comment about the bathroom gave John the opportunity to tell another joke. The joke he tells this time is similar to the earlier one in the sense that it is meant to shock Maria by pushing the boundaries of conversational norms. This time, though, he uses Burglish, rather than English, perhaps because for this joke to work, it needs to be told in the appropriate register. If John uses language that is too formal, then it would not be funny, but if he uses language that is too crude, he again runs the risk of offending Maria. The earlier joke, about being able to watch pornography, was not as linguistically complex, as it depended on what was said rather than how it was said, and this might explain why he continued to use English in that case.

This analysis of the use of humor in the conversation between John and Maria has highlighted some of the complexity surrounding this everyday activity. To tell his jokes successfully, that is, to make Maria laugh without offending her, John needs to

interpret the situation, including the relationship between Maria and himself, be aware of certain conversational and social norms, and then be able to formulate the jokes linguistically, which involves, among other things, deciding which code to use. He also has to ascertain if he has the power to tell jokes such as these in this context. As in the conversation between Maria and Ei, a sensitivity to the power dynamic between them is a key element in the success of this interaction. John was able to tell his joke, but in order not to bore Maria, he also needed to be sensitive to her signal that she wanted to change the subject.

In this part of the study, I have used Bourdieu's metaphor of a 'feel for the game' to look at this interaction between John and Maria. Although Bourdieu has a reputation of being particularly difficult to read (Giddens, 1979; Jenkins, 2002; Mouzelis, 1995), he does offer us this very useful metaphor, which sheds light on not only how actors interact with different social entities, but also on how they acquire this knowledge, that is, through durable immersion in social life (Bourdieu, 1990). This raises the question of how such knowledge can be taught in the classroom, which relates to the earlier discussion of how teachers see themselves. One approach might be the one suggested by Vygotsky (1997b) when he referred to teachers as "director[s] of the social environment" (p. 49), which would allow them to influence the students' immersion in various forms of life.