

Power perceptions and negotiations in a cross-national email writing activity

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Abstract

The present study investigates EFL students' perceptions of power differentials and their negotiation strategies when communicating with native English-speaking students via emails. The study involved 28 Taiwanese and American undergraduates who participated in a semester-long cross-national email writing activity. Findings show that students in both locales recognized power differentials. Focusing on the Taiwanese students, the study identifies their textual identities and writing styles used to negotiate power differentials in three types of interactions – balance, endurance, and resistance. The findings offer important implications for teaching English writing in cross-national digital spaces.

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Introduction

The wide use of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) technologies has made the teaching of L2 writing no longer confined to a specific geographic location. They have increasingly connected L2 students and native speaker students across national borders. While cross-national writing activities have been reported to enhance L2 students' writing (Zheng & You, 2011), they also reinforce cultural-rhetorical differences (St. Amant, 2002) and generate unique power relations (Spears, Postmes, Lea, & Wolbert, 2002). When native English speaking (NES) and non-native English speaking (NNES) students communicate in English online, asymmetrical power relations can emerge even though the students may consider each other equals at the outset (Stockwell & Levy, 2001). NNES students who are not yet proficient in English or not familiar with the norms and values of the target culture may find themselves caught in a power differential.

Email has been a commonly used tool to teach L2 writing and to encourage language and cultural learning across national borders (Barson, Frommer & Schwartz, 1993; Leahy, 2001; Liaw, 1998; Liaw & Johnson, 2001; Stockwell & Levy, 2001; Tella, 1991; Warschauer, 1995). As both an instrument to support composition teaching and a form of writing (Bloch, 2007; Swales & Feak, 2000), email has appealed to both teachers and students. Similar to other forms of computer-mediated discourse, email allows students to explore different aspects of their personality that they may not feel as comfortable expressing in face-to-face situations. It gives them a space to exchange their opinions on common interests and topics, thus creating a sense of community and a shared knowledge base. However, scarce research has examined power relations when NNES students meet NES students in email writing activities. Instead, much scholarly attention has

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been devoted to the power differentials between students and teachers in email communications (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005; Bloch, 2002; Casanave, 2004; Chen, 2006; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Warschauer, 1999; You, 2007).

To fill the gap in L2 writing research, the present study investigates EFL students' perception of power relations and the strategies that they use to negotiate power differentials with NES students in email communication. The study involves a group of Taiwanese and American undergraduates who participated in a semester-long email writing activity and finds that students in both locales identified power differentials. Focusing on the Taiwanese students, the study identifies three interactional styles and explores how, with each style, the Taiwanese students developed different discursive and nondiscursive strategies to deal with the power differentials. The findings of the study offer important implications for teaching English-language writing across national borders.

Power differentials in email communication

Power, from a sociological perspective, has been viewed as the ability derived from external social status, which one can use to influence or change others (French & Raven, 1959; Henley, 1977; Johnson, 1976) or access resources with privilege (Depret & Fiske, 1993; Kanter, 1977). French and Raven (1959) claimed that the extent of power, or power differential, depends on the relationship between or perceptions of the involved parties. They proposed a typology of social power based on its five sources: reward, coerciveness, expertise, legitimacy, and referent. Power derived from reward or coerciveness is possessed by one who has the ability to provide rewards or punishments to the others. Expertise refers to knowledge in a specific domain which leads someone to be perceived as more powerful than the others. Legitimacy refers to a perception that as the result of one's particular social role, an individual has the right to influence or control the others, such as happens with the power of parents or priests. Lastly, individuals or social groups possess referent power when they are perceived as attractive to those who are willing to defer to them to be accepted. In short, French and Raven (1959) saw power as derived from the relationships between or perceptions of interactive parties. Moreover, power does not just arise from external status or privileged access to resources but can also emerge from one's needs or desire for maintaining relationships.

In interpersonal relations, research has found that people in different national cultures tolerate inequality at different levels, as measured by power distance (PD). Hofstede (2001) defines PD as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (p. 98). After surveying IBM employees across 50 countries, Hofstede identified PD as a key cultural dimension and calculated the national average scores in PD. In cultures with low PD, such as Austria, Denmark, and the United States, people accept that power relations are consultative and expect more egalitarian relations among people. However, in cultures with high PD, such as Malaysia, China, and India, people acknowledge and accept inequality resulted from their hierarchical or social positions. Hofstede (2001) asserted that different PD expectations are ideologically situated in different sociocultural contexts and can mentally program one's values, attitudes, and behaviors.

Research in computer-mediated communication has found that individuals from different PD cultures tend to adopt distinctive communication styles (Bjorge, 2007; Verner & Beamer, 2005). Using Hofstede's (2001) definition of PD as her research framework, Bjorge (2007) studied formality in students' email correspondence with two professors in Norway. Her corpus consisted of 344 emails written by 11 domestic and 99 international students from 34 countries. After analyzing initial greetings and complimentary closings in these emails, Bjorge found that students from high PD cultures are more likely to choose a formal greeting and complimentary closing than students from low PD cultures. Therefore, she suggested that national culture influences students' rapport management and discursive choices. How individuals negotiate power differentials and how students from different PD cultures interact with each other, however, are issues unexplored by Bjorge (2007) and Hofstede (2001).

Regarding L2 students negotiating power differentials in email communication, most studies have focused on the hierarchical role relationship of students and faculty members (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005; Bloch, 2002; Casanave, 2004; Chen, 2006; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Warschauer, 1999; You, 2007). For example, including both the linguistic and cultural factors in her longitudinal study, Chen (2006) found that her informant, Ling, a Taiwanese graduate student, applied different discursive strategies to communicate with her professors than to communicate with her peers. Using critical discourse analysis, Chen discovered that Ling's ineffective email communication with her professors resulted from insufficient linguistic competence and unfamiliarity with target cultural norms. As email communication solely depends on textual information with little paralinguistic cues such as facial expressions and gestures, Chen (2006) concluded that linguistic and cultural differences make email communication more complicated than face-to-face communication.

When studying L2 students' negotiation with power differentials, previous research has examined their discursive choices made to construct certain textual identities. For example, [Chen \(2006\)](#) found that in Ling's early correspondence with her professors, she wrote lengthy emails, adopting inductive structures, "Want Statements," and a humbling tone to create an identity that she desired to perform. These discursive choices help to construct "an indirect, humble self and a help-needed student" (p. 51), who mistakenly deemed lengthiness with a delayed purpose statement as appropriate rhetorical choices to communicate with her professors. [Bloch \(2002\)](#) noted that his international graduate students often managed to create a very personal identity in their communication with him about academic matters. They stayed at a personal level in their emails and often described things unrelated to school work, such as their state of mood and weather.

In addition to their textual identities, researchers have also examined students' discursive choices made to achieve practical purposes when communicating with professors. For example, [Bloch \(2002\)](#) examined the emails that his students wrote to him as composition instructor, focusing on the rhetorical strategies they used in four contexts: phatic communication, making excuses, asking for help, and making formal requests. Bloch found that in most contexts, his students sought ways to disrupt the monolithic, authoritative speech of the instructor by creating a dialogical, informal, personal communication with him. However, when students who did not know him requested his permission to take his course, they resorted to a formal writing style with very few grammatical and spelling errors. Different rhetorical contexts demanded that the students switch between formal and informal styles.

Besides discursive choices, L2 students also make non-discursive choices to construct identities or to negotiate power differentials ([Bloch, 2008; You, 2007, 2008, 2011](#)). The non-discursive choices can include different font sizes and styles, emoticons, colors, designs, hyperlinks, pictures, music, and video clips. For example, [Bloch \(2008\)](#) provided the reflections of one of his students to demonstrate on how she used colors to portray herself online. She used three different colors in the background of her website to show that her life "is colorful and not boring" and to make her site visitors "feel free and happy" (p. 115). Similarly, when [You \(2007\)](#) asked his international students to post their essays online as an assignment, they managed to negotiate his authority by constructing very personal discourses and subjectivities using non-discursive means: they posted pictures taken at home or in the United States and links to websites to promote cities in their home countries. A Malaysian student uploaded some MP3 files of Islamic music onto his site to share with his friends. The wide use of CMC technologies has afforded L2 writers a wide array of non-discursive means to construct identities and negotiate power differentials.

In writing activities involving both NES and NNES students, based on the literature review, a unique power dynamic may emerge. First, following [French and Raven's \(1959\)](#) typology of social power, NES and NNES students may derive power from their expertise on certain subject areas or their perceived expertise and privilege. Although the students are peers in role relationships, as [Chen \(2006\)](#) maintains, NNES students with varying linguistic competence and limited familiarity with target cultural norms may find themselves in an underprivileged position. By contrast, NES students may derive power from their expertise in the target language and culture. Second, based on [Bjorge \(2007\)](#) and [Hofstede \(2001\)](#), NES and NNES students may come from different PD cultures and have different tolerance level for power differentials. Third, as [Bloch \(2002\)](#) and [You \(2007\)](#) show, students may use writing to establish certain identities and negotiate power differentials. Understanding the complexity of the power dynamics is crucial for using CMC technologies to teach L2 writing across borders.

The present study attempts to investigate power relations in computer-mediated cross-national writing activities, specifically how students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds negotiate power differentials through writing. Two questions have driven the study: first, how do NNES and NES students perceive power differentials in cross-national writing activities? Second, how do NNES students use discursive and non-discursive means to construct identities and negotiate power differentials?

Methods

Participants and contexts

A qualitative study was conducted at a top-tier national university in Taiwan and a state university in the United States. Convenience sampling method was used. Participants consisted of 17 Taiwanese juniors from the Schools of Business and Social Sciences and 12 American juniors and seniors from the Department of English. Among the total 29 participants, 8 were males and 21 were females. 5 American and 9 Taiwanese students claimed that they had

traveled abroad or had communicated with people from another culture before. The Taiwanese students, taking the course “Cross-Cultural Communication” taught by the teacher-researcher, were honors students with high-intermediate to advanced English proficiencies. They had passed the high-intermediate level General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) administered by the Taiwanese government or scored more than 550 points in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The class focused on comparing American and Chinese cultures and dealt with four topics in the semester: college life, sexism, press freedom, and social business. The American students, all Caucasians, native speakers of English, and English majors, were honors students taking the course “World Rhetorics.” The class read about communication practices in ancient China, Greece, and India. Both courses were writing intensive, requiring the completion of several short papers during the semester.

An email writing activity was incorporated into both courses to encourage cross-cultural communication and language learning. The students were paired up as key-pals for exchange. First, the American students sent self-introductions to the teacher-researcher. Next, the Taiwanese students chose whom they were interested in communicating with and sent their self-introductions to the American students. Due to the unequal numbers of students on the two sides, one American student was paired with one or two Taiwanese students. Instruction on email writing conventions was given to the Taiwanese students before the exchange. The two groups of students were encouraged to explore the class readings further by asking each other questions about communication practices in their respective home cultures. During the exchange, the students were asked to turn in reflection papers (4 for the Taiwanese students and 2 for the American students). The reflection paper assignment was designed to elicit students’ thoughts about their email exchange experiences, including what they had encountered and learned about communicating across linguistic and cultural differences. Every time they turned in their reflections, they briefly shared their experiences in class. The curriculum was designed based on the belief that the email exchange would allow both parties to better understand the rhetorical culture of their respective nations. In the process of exchange, it was also hoped that, according to second language acquisition theories (Long, 1996, 1998; Swain, 1995), the Taiwanese students would be motivated to write in English and enhance their English proficiency through meaningful input and output.

In order to study student interactions in a natural milieu, as teacher-researcher, I tried to minimize my interference. Once the exchange started, I did not monitor the students’ correspondence or set deadlines for the email exchange, nor were the students assigned any specific topics. Students were free to discuss whatever topics that they felt comfortable with. The purpose was to make their email exchange come as close as possible to natural peer communication. Except for the reflection papers, most of the data was collected at the end of the semester to minimize the teacher-researcher’s influence.

Data collection

To answer the research questions, several types of data were collected. To understand how the students perceived power differentials, two surveys and semi-structured interviews were conducted. Students were surveyed via email twice at the end of the semester on their perceptions of power relations and their attitudes toward the email writing activity (see the survey questions in [Appendices A and B](#)). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Taiwanese students, also at the end of the semester. During the interviews, students were asked about their perceptions of the power relations and their satisfaction with the relations. In addition, they were also asked about the ways that they positioned themselves in the relations and the strategies that they used to negotiate the power differentials, information important to answer the second research question. Due to technical difficulties, the American students were not interviewed face-to-face but were asked about the aforementioned issues through emails.

To understand how the students establish identities and negotiate power differentials using writing, their emails and reflections were collected. At the end of the semester, both the Taiwanese and American students turned in their emails voluntarily, having been informed that whether they did or not would not affect their final grades. Sixteen Taiwanese and ten American students submitted selected emails, reducing the total number of participants in the study from 28 to 26. A total of 122 emails were collected, 65 submitted by the Taiwanese students and 57 by the American students. Students in both locales also turned in their reflection papers during the semester.

Data analysis

To enhance the reliability of data analysis, I examined the data together with a colleague who was trained in rhetoric and writing. First, we analyzed the surveys and the interview protocols to determine the students’ perceptions of power

differentials. Second, according to the students' perceptions and tolerance of power differentials, three types of interactions were identified among the Taiwanese students. Third, under each interactional style, the Taiwanese students' emails were triangulated with their reflections, interviews, and their key-pals' data to understand their evolving discursive and nondiscursive strategies used to negotiate power differentials. Because texts can be interpreted differently by different readers, email discourses were examined considering the text, context, and individual interviews. For example, one's self-disclosure may be interpreted as friendly to one but impolite to another, or one suggesting error corrections may be perceived by one as a tutor holding more power but may be appreciated as a friend with equal status by another. Thus, email discourses were triangulated with other types of data, including checking with the students in the interviews.

The emails were analyzed to understand how the Taiwanese students constructed textual identities. In light of the identities that the students proclaimed in their reflections and interviews, such as "friend," "classmate," "tourist guide," "cultural ambassador," and "cultural fighter," we paid close attention to the students' use of pronouns. Pronoun selection suggests the positioning of the writer's self in connection to others (Hyland, 2001, 2002; Ivanic, 1994, 1998; Kuo, 1999; Tang & John, 1999). To study a student's textual identity, first person pronouns "I" and "we" are analyzed along with other pronouns such as "you" or "they." The examination of those pronouns in specific contexts suggested the proximity or social distance the writer wanted to maintain. The proxemics thus determined could support or undermine the textual identities that the students claimed.

In addition to the discursive construction of textual identities, we also analyzed formality in various contexts. In both Bloch (2002) and Chen (2006), students often used informal, dialogical style to undermine the professors' authoritative speeches. We adopted Chen's (2006) coding scheme to identify informal styles used in email communication. The scheme examines opening greetings, closings, interjections ("yeah," "oh," and "wow"), conversational markers ("well," "you know"), reduced forms ("wanna" or "gonna"), phonetic spellings ("u" for "you"), Internet acronyms ("LOL," "OMG," and "THX"), contractions ("I'll" and "can't"), subject "I" deletion, or verb "be" deletion in questions ("Everything ok?"), paralinguistic symbols (upper case "PLEASE," multiple vowels "sooo," multiple punctuation marks "???", "!!!," and "..."), audio/visual attachments, and emoticons (^_^) (p. 40). When none of the elements in the scheme was found in the student emails, we discussed the texts within contexts in order to determine the style of the emails. The following is an example to illustrate how we analyzed the emails to uncover the students' negotiation strategies.

In the following email, WY¹ intended to introduce "one intriguing thing living in Taiwan" to his American partner.

Because of the high population dense, it is very common for us to live in apartments. As you can see the picture, it is my home. I know it is like a slum if it is in the states. ☺ However, it is an expensive apartment. Can you imagine how mush it is?

It costs about USD 575,800.

There are 3 bedrooms, one bath, and 1210SF. One family room, a small dining and kitchen.

But no garage, sprinklers and fenced.

[...] Quite interesting isn't it?

If you are interested in anything about Taiwan, I can share with you one thing each week. (October 19th, emphasis original)



¹ The names of all students used in this paper are aliases. Only those students who have given me consent to use their emails, reflections, surveys, and interviews are quoted in this study.

In this example, WY portrayed himself both as a friend and as a tourist guide. He used short or colloquial expressions, such as “Can you imagine how mush it is?” “There are 3 bedrooms, one bath, and 1210SF.” “Quite interesting isn’t it?” He used “I” and “you” repeatedly to sound like he was talking to the other person face-to-face or on the phone. He positioned his partner as his friend and confided something private to her, including the price of his family apartment. He also used American cultural references to create a sense of affinity: “USD,” “SF,” “garage,” “sprinkler,” and “fence.” In addition to these discursive strategies, he also used non-discursive ones. The bold font style shows his emphasis. The smiley further confirms his effort to sound informal and friendly. The apartment building image provides a helpful illustration. Like some of Bloch’s (2002) international students, WY adopted an informal and dialogical style to shorten the distance between himself and his American partner.

Results

Perceptions of power differentials

The surveys indicated that students from both groups perceived power differentials. One open-ended question in the first survey asked: “For any reason, have you ever felt unequal relations between you and your key-pal(s) during your communication? Or have you ever felt your key-pal as being superior/inferior to you? Why or why not?” Out of the 16 Taiwanese students who submitted their surveys, eight (50%) reported that they felt less-powered than their American correspondents. Additionally, three other students expressed feelings of disadvantaged status, i.e., suffering from trying to please their key-pals or feeling less mature or smart. When these three students were included, eleven of the Taiwanese students (69%) viewed themselves as less powerful than their American counterparts. By contrast, out of the ten American students who submitted their emails, two (20%, Dave and Amy) reported feeling less knowledgeable than their Taiwanese counterparts in computer literacy and international affairs. Three (30%, Ben, Vicky, and Kelly) expressed feelings of superiority in linguistic and cultural aspects, but none of the Taiwanese students perceived themselves as superior to their American key-pals. Five American (50%) and six Taiwanese (38%) students perceived their relations as equal. The power differentials between the two groups are mapped out in Table 1. The survey suggests that asymmetrical power relations were perceived by both NNEs and NES students in the email writing activity.

Student answers to questions on proxemics further confirmed the general pattern of the students’ perceptions. Two questions asked in the second survey, in an effort to understand the participants’ sense of interpersonal distance in the email writing activity: “What was your expectation **before** this cross-cultural email exchange with your foreign key-pals?” and “What was your expectation **after** this cross-cultural email exchange with your foreign key-pals?” For both questions, students were asked to select either “learning culture” or “making friends.” The impersonal choice of “learning culture” suggests that more social distance may be expected, while the choice of “making friends” suggests that the participant expects a closer distance or equal relationship during the interactions. According to the survey, four American students (33%) expected to make friends before this activity, compared to eight Taiwanese students (47%). The three-month email exchange shortened two American student’s proximity preferences, as they changed their expectations from “learning culture” to “making friends.” No American students moved from “making friends” to “learning culture.” By contrast, no Taiwanese student’s proximity was shortened during the three months. Instead, three changed their expectations from “making friends” to “learning culture” at the end of the semester, indicating feeling a greater social proximity after the email communication. According to the survey on students’ perceptions of power differentials, the same three Taiwanese students reported feelings of inferiority. They also expressed frustrations with the email communication in their interviews. The student reports of their sense of proxemics confirmed the general pattern of power differentials in Table 1, i.e., eleven Taiwanese students (64%) perceived inequality.

Table 1

Email exchange group makeup and the perceived power differentials.

NES	Lucy		Jill		Lisa	Erin		Jen	Dave	Amy	Amy	{Ben}		{Vicky}	{Kelly}	
EFL	WJ	WU	CH	YI	YC	PY	CI	AC	MK	UF	WY	YP	JE	JF	WA	WD

NES: American students EFL: Taiwanese students

Feeling less privileged {Feeling more privileged}

Strategies of power negotiation

The strategies of negotiation depended on the students' perceptions of power differentials and their interactional styles. Based on the collected data, including student emails, reflections, surveys, and interviews, three interactional styles are identified among the Taiwanese students: balance, endurance, and resistance. Under the category of "balance" are interactions in which the Taiwanese students did not perceive inequality and were satisfied with their communication in the end. The interactions in which the Taiwanese students were aware of but passively accepted inequality to maintain surface harmony are placed in the category of "endurance." Under the category of "resistance" are interactions in which the Taiwanese students perceived and took action to resist inequality. Power perceptions and negotiations are dynamic and dependent on evolving interactions. Students could change to very different strategies when they shifted from one interactional type to another. In the following sections, I will use examples to illustrate, under each interactional style, the discursive and non-discursive strategies used by the Taiwanese students.

Balance

The term "balance" does not suggest an interactional style in which the students encountered no power differential. Rather, power differentials existed in a way that did not make one feel privileged or degraded. According to their surveys, reflections, and interviews, six Taiwanese students consistently thought of themselves as friends or classmates to their American counterparts and none of them felt inferior nor superior to their key-pals. Their textual identities are relatively stable throughout the exchange. The discursive strategy shared among them to negotiate power differentials, although they did not perceive inequality, was the use of friendly, informal, and conversational style. Their American partners reciprocated in the same style. They shared personal experiences and provided emotional support to each other. However, the informal style used by Taiwanese students, which often lacked hedges or mitigations, at times sounded blunt or assertive to the American students. The Taiwanese students also managed to maintain close relations through non-discursive strategies, including sending Internet links and audio–visual attachments, using emoticons ($N = 13$), and establishing email exchange routines.

This balanced interactional style is best illustrated by the example of Jill and YI. They both expected to make friends through the email writing activity. In the 11 emails (6 from Jill and 5 from YI), they often used symbols or emoticons to sound casual, such as "=", "crazy ~ ~," "^ ^," "!!!!!" "haha." They also exchanged pictures, YouTube links, and other audio/visual files on the Internet. Their topics tended to be personal, such as favorite TV programs, personal academic plans, campus activities, feelings about personal encounters, and family gatherings during holidays.

In terms of language, YI's expressions seemed to be less euphemistic than Jill. YI used few mitigating forms, such as modal or hedged constructions, to soften her tone. Her discourse often contained collective pronouns or nouns (such as "we," "us," "they," "Westerners," "Chinese"), inclusive modifiers or boosters ("all," "obviously," "very," "apparently," "always"), and simple present tense, which suggests facts, truths, or routines. YI's less hedged and assertive discourse is typical of the Taiwanese students, which is consistent with the findings of [Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig \(1996\)](#) about the language of NNEs students with intermediate English proficiency. For example, YI opined on watching American TV shows in Taiwan, such as "America's Next Top Model" in one of her emails:

From those reality shows, **all** of my friends are very surprised at **Westerners'** attitude. Won't these girls in "Americas' Next Top Model" take revenge on each other since they apparently are hostile to each other? (emphasis added)

YI's overgeneralization of American TV shows worried Jill. In her reflection paper, Jill expressed her reservation, "I don't like to think that other cultures are getting their images of America from shows like 'America's next Top Model' and movies like 'American Pie' . . . that is not how the average American is" (Jill, Reflection 2). In her emails to YI, Jill contextualized her response: "I have only seen 'America's Next Top Model' and 'Sex in the City' a couple of times. Those shows are not my idea of good television! But those types of shows are all very popular here, so I guess that I'm just unusual. =)." Jill asserted her NES status or expert power by teaching YI about American culture; however, she shared her personal feelings as an individual, acknowledged the popularity of the shows and also used an emoticon trying to soften her disagreement and to reduce the power differentials between them.

Their mutual efforts to make the exchange friendly created a language learning opportunity for YI. When asked about their language use in an interview, YI noted that Jill was polite and cautious to avoid overgeneralizations, and

that she had tried to adopt lexico-syntactic modifications and mitigating expressions from Jill. Some hedging expressions appeared in YI's later emails, such as, "**I think** this is the reason why Western people **may** think Asian people speak poor English" (emphasis added). YI's later discourse suggests that she might have taken Jill as her language model, and the stylistic shift reveals initial signs of linguistic transformation in YI's English. However, such changes in her discourse were limited. The comfortable relation shared between them and Jill's friendly tone did not compel YI to make more stylistic changes even though she had recognized the differences in their email writing styles.

Endurance

The Taiwanese students who experienced the "endurance" style of interactions felt disadvantaged mainly because of their linguistic and cultural status. Although the American students claimed to be interested in Chinese culture and none complained about the Taiwanese students' English, CI, JE, AC, and JF reported in their interviews that their inferiority came from Taiwan's "inferior" cultural status in the global village and their limited English proficiency. Among the six Taiwanese students who identified "endurance" as their predominant interactional style, four indicated that their textual identity was close to "cultural ambassador" or "tourist guide" because they felt obligated or urged to explain Taiwanese culture to their correspondents. Their emails tended to be formal, polite, academic, and fact-oriented. The conversation in general was question-answer style with few follow-ups. Most of their topics were serious and related to culture or politics. Furthermore, the most emoticons ($N = 21$) were found in the emails by these six Taiwanese students. In using the emoticons, the students might have been attempting to minimize the power differentials and to maintain surface harmony.

CI adjusted her language to negotiate the power differentials with Erin. CI's early emails tended to be academic and polite. Of the six emails that CI submitted, she frequently made apologies in the first four. After a short greeting, CI usually answered Erin's questions and then apologized for her answers. For example, in one email she said, "I'm not sure if what I said is easy to understand or not." Besides apologizing, CI showed politeness by disclosing her surprise and praising Erin for her knowledge of Chinese culture. Later, CI questioned herself, both her position in the power relationship and her negotiation strategies, in her reflection:

I was surprised that she knew our festival, and seemed to know more than just the name of it. However, then I got confused if I was overreacted or not. Like we all know Christmas and Halloween. Maybe these [Chinese] festivals are common known by American. Why Taiwanese people usually are surprised if American know some Chinese or Chinese cultures?. I started to think if I put my culture in a subordinate position to their culture (CI, Reflection 3).

Instead of resisting the unequal status she perceived by acting aloof or unfriendly, CI consciously modeled Erin's writing style and chose more egalitarian words to reposition herself. For example, instead of apologizing for her English, CI borrowed Erin's wording to assure her message: "I hope that helps answer your question." She also toned down her surprise about Erin's fine knowledge of Chinese culture; for example, she wrote, "I am **glad** that you seem to know some Taoism already" (emphasis added). In addition, CI later employed emoticons, slang, and conversational markers, such as "well," "you know," and "wow" to soften her academic voice and to sound casual.

Other students' negotiations, however, were not as effective as CI's. Some Taiwanese students appeared to have strong egos and did not want to budge in the email communication. For example, JE complained in an interview that she felt emailing her key-pal, Ben, was like "showing her passion to a cold shoulder" ("熱臉貼冷屁股") because Ben often "sent late emails with an indifferent tone" and avoided answering personal questions (JE, Reflection 3). With the expectation of "learning culture" rather than "making friends," Ben positioned himself as his Taiwanese correspondents' "information source" to help them learn about American culture "for the completion of their course work" (Ben, Reflection 1). As a native speaker, Ben played the role of tutor, and consciously or unconsciously controlled the floor by asking questions that he was interested in and ignoring JE's questions. His expert power can be glimpsed in a statement from an email interview, "Sometimes I think the Taiwanese started with an odd perception of America, but I was always able to correct and clarify it for them." To save face, JE said in her reflection paper, "I also tried to keep a distance by responding to him in an academic way." Using a formal, "academic" style to confront a power differential, though it did not change Ben's expert power, made JE feel that she did "not lose face."

Unlike Ben, Dave and Amy felt unprivileged for their lack of computer literacy and global knowledge. In his reflection paper, Dave stated frankly, "I am not particularly savvy when it comes to technology, and I mistook his

[MK, his key-pal] MSN address for a regular e-mail address. My Taiwanese pen pals were more aware of and interested in things in the rest of the world than perhaps I was.” Amy even sounded overwhelmed in her second reflection, “I very much hate technology. . . I got swamped with it. . . I feel inferior to WY [Amy’s key-pal]. . . I live in my own world. I’m not concerned with politics and global issues and saving humanity and all of that.” While both Dave and Amy acknowledged that Mk and WY derived power from their knowledge of computer technologies and international affairs, Amy also consciously rejected such power in her interaction with WY. Dave’s and Amy’s perception of their lack of expert power echoes Zuengler’s (1989) and Woken and Swales (1989) findings that NNES students who possess domain-related knowledge can show more signs of discourse dominance than their NES counterparts.

However, despite being viewed as knowledgeable in computers and global issues, MK and WY also reported feelings of inequality. In their interviews, both indicated that it was difficult to ingratiate themselves with their key-pals because the latter usually responded passively and sounded insipid and distant in their emails. For example, Dave answered MK’s question on the purpose of life jokingly, “The meaning of life is 42,” adopting an obscure reference from the novel *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. Dave explained the expression in an email interview: “It shows the absurdity of looking for an ultimate or definitive meaning in life.” Dave chose an expression unfamiliar to MK to express his life philosophy, which however made MK feel Dave’s “distance and coldness,” and MK took it as a gesture to show Dave’s “reluctance to share his personal thoughts.” (MK, Reflection 4 & interview). Therefore, in his later emails, MK employed a formal style and discussed more impersonal topics, such as the increasing gap of global poverty, social business, and the rising Chinese economy.

WY’s discourse strategy failed to reduce the power differentials either. He tried to ingratiate himself with Amy by “introducing things that US doesn’t have or things they may be interested in” (WY, Reflection 3). However, Amy only answered questions and did not ask any in return. Amy’s passivity may be derived from her frustration toward technology. At the end of semester, WY lowered his expectation from “making friends” to “learning culture” because “she [Amy] seems too busy to be interested in knowing Taiwan and me” (WY, Reflection 4). WY, though feeling as low-powered as Amy, continued to ask questions to sustain their conversation. Their interactions are different from previous findings that power holders often ask questions to dominate the floor (Fairclough, 1989; Freiermuth, 2001).

Under the interactional style of endurance, asymmetrical power relations were perceived either by one party or both. To negotiate the power differentials, the Taiwanese students adjusted their expectations and discourses. Some, such as CI, modeled their American correspondents’ discourse styles and sounded casual by adopting emoticons; some, such as JE, MK, and WY, negotiated the power differentials by sounding academic, asking questions about American culture, researching on the Internet, and writing long messages to construct a “positive” or “knowledgeable” image. Power negotiations are sometimes threatening for both the power holders and the less powered. Impersonal topics and formal discourse may then be adopted in order not to offend or in order to keep a distance from the other. However, those who employed a formal writing style, such as Ben and Dave, were not necessarily from hierarchical cultures; those who took the floor, such as WY, were not necessarily the power holders.

Resistance

Under the interactional style of resistance, the Taiwanese students tended to be polite in the beginning. However, after perceiving and suffering from inequality, they changed their tone from friendly to either aloof or unfriendly. Their discourse changed more drastically than that in the other two interactional styles, usually from congenial to uncongenial, from informal to formal, or from open-minded to opinionated. They preferred to talk about what they were familiar with presumably in order to gain confidence and power. They often delayed their responses, wrote indifferent short messages, or simply did not reply to resist their perceived inequality.

YP came to his resistance gradually during his correspondence with Ben. In his first reflection paper, YP was very excited about the exchange and called it “a super interesting experience to make foreign friends.” Nevertheless, he gradually felt frustrated by Ben’s corrections of his word choice. In his second reflection paper, YP wrote: “I thought I’d gotten accustomed to writing essays in English due to trainings in English courses I took. . . But I. . . doomed to lose my proud ability in English writing when I responded emails to Ben.” To not be looked down upon as “stupid,” YP did extensive research on cultural topics and consulted a dictionary to reduce language errors. Despite YP’s efforts, Ben usually dominated the floor and asked difficult questions about Confucianism and Taoism, YP’s views on the most recent Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and the political relationship between the U.S. and China. YP started to reveal his

discontent in his third reflection: “I spent looooooots of time on googling information to satisfy him. . . [however], I would doubt if Ben really felt curious about these issues. . . he never followed up the issues he raised.” YP also complained about the unequal relations. He did extensive research to answer Ben’s questions but Ben simply said “I don’t know” to many of his questions. YP felt that this was “unfair,” and was “totally not satisfied” (YP, Reflection 3). After being asked whether he had ever heard of “Shakespeare,” YP felt insulted (YP, Interview). In YP’s last reflection paper, he unloaded his discontent and unveiled his strategy to counter the power differential:

Ben shaped himself as a knowledgeable, highly competitive image to me. . . In the very beginning, I just supposed Ben was an excellent student, and I was much more stupid than him. But I changed my thoughts gradually because I found he seems to only know what he learned, and he usually showed off himself. Thus, I just started to tell him about my plans, including my research paper on economics, international volunteer program in my winter vacation, and the Lo-real marketing competition, etc. there are kind of competitive actions between us.

Feeling slighted, YP resorted to a less accommodating discourse by highlighting his curricular and extracurricular achievements. In his reflections, Ben admitted his expert power: “I had a slight tendency to feel smarter than my key-pals, given their somewhat basic understanding of the English language. . . as the semester progressed, our topics became a little more in depth. . . we even discussed some issues that typically invite tension. . . and the [responses] were more opinionated and less informational.”

Entangled in an asymmetrical power relation, YP repositioned himself and adjusted his language. In his emails, YP first positioned himself as a friend; he shared his personal interests, favorite TV programs, music, and travel experience. He used an open-minded and personal style of language, inviting Ben to talk about himself. He wrote, for example, “I like to explore the world and make friends with others. . . Maybe we can contact each other through MSN, Skype, or blog?” (October 2). In response to Ben’s impersonal questions and critique of his word choices, YP constructed an image of scholar/lecturer, taking a detached and academic tone to discuss formal topics, such as culture, history, and politics in Taiwan. In this tone, for example, YP wrote about the relationship between China and the United States:

In 1949 the World War two ended and soon after that the communism force occupied the whole mainland China, causing the democratic government to retreat to Taiwan. At that time, the U.S. government sent a naval force to patrol the Taiwan Strait in order to prevent Taiwan from being communized. Moreover, America kept aiding Taiwan in terms of finance and resources because of Taiwan’s weakness and vulnerability to the communism force. Therefore, Taiwanese people had a very positive attitude toward America, until 1978. (December 9)

At this stage, YP endured the perceived inequality with Ben. Later, YP’s self esteem was piqued by Ben’s arrogant messages. He felt compelled to defend his “Chinese pride,” so he positioned himself as a cultural fighter. His emails became more opinionated and contained many collective nouns and pronouns to create an interpersonal divide – you and us. For example,

We have studied the Analects by Confucius since **we** were in elementary school; that is, we were necessary to take the related course to get full understanding about Confucius. But, we seldom get closed to Tao Te Ching. I think the reason is that **we Chinese** really appreciate Confucius culture, and even the emperors were in favor of it. . . Although some points of view [of Confucius] are kind of out of date, **we Chinese** still proud of the spirits and thoughts because Confucius is truly a outstanding people in Chinese history especially in education area. (December 13th, emphasis added)

In the above quote, the wide use of “we” and “we Chinese” indicates that YP intended to draw a line between “we” and “you.” Comparing the last two email excerpts, one could easily notice that there are many more grammatical and orthographic errors in the last email, which seems to indicate YP’s increasing impatience with Ben. Moving through the three interactional styles, YP constructed various textual identities and modified his discursive styles to negotiate the power differentials.

Discussion

The findings indicate that more than half of the participants perceived power differentials in the email writing activity. These differentials came from three major sources. First, most students saw the knowledge of English and

American culture as affording the American students power. Amy and David also viewed their Taiwanese correspondents' knowledge of computer technologies and international affairs as a source of power. In fact, these are all sources of expert power, which caused the perception of inequality among most participants. Second, some Taiwanese students felt inferior because they believed that Taiwan has a low political and cultural status in the world. Their inferiority afforded the American students a type of legitimacy power. Third, students from both locales, particularly the Taiwanese students, had the intention of maintaining good relations and continuing the email writing activity. This desire created referent power in the other party. Perceiving these different power sources made many participants feel locked in asymmetrical power relations.

The students, particularly the Taiwanese students, negotiated with the power differentials by adopting different discursive strategies and generating various textual identities. While students under the interactional style of balance used a friendly, informal, and conversational communication style to create a "friend" or "classmate" image, students under the endurance style preferred formal, polite, academic, and fact-oriented language and constructed a "tourist guide" or "cultural ambassador" identity. The latter group adopted a question-answer pattern in their conversations with the American students with few follow-ups. Most of their topics were not personal, but more cultural and political related. Under the interactional style of resistance, YP moved from open-minded and personal language to more opinionated language filled with many collective nouns and pronouns. His use of nouns and pronouns created an interpersonal divide and resistance, generating a "cultural fighter" image. Despite using English as a foreign language, the Taiwanese students were able to assess their relations and adopted different discursive styles to negotiate the power differentials.

The Taiwanese students' negotiation strategies have challenged static views of culture and language in cross-national communication. According to Bjorge (2007), Hofstede (2001), and Verner and Beamer (2005), high power-distance cultures embed their social norms within hierarchical inequality. One from a high PD culture such as Taiwan may prefer formal writing style to emphasize high power distance and authority. By contrast, low PD cultures such as the United States value more horizontal social relations. One coming from a low PD culture might feel comfortable with informal email writing and would like to maintain low power distance. Ben, however, coming from a low PD culture, preferred a formal, academic style, which generated a sense of distance for JE, who was from a purportedly high PD culture. In contrast, while some Taiwanese students used a formal, academic style to show politeness, demonstrate knowledge, and express their eagerness to engage the American students, many of them consistently adopted an informal, colloquial style, defying the generalizations made by Bjorge (2007), Hofstede (2001), and Verner and Beamer (2005). That is, formality and style are not culturally bound but rather can be strategically used by individuals from whatever cultures to negotiate power differentials.

The email writing activity encouraged language and cultural learning among the participants. In their communications, many Taiwanese students modeled or borrowed the American students' discursive features to negotiate the power differentials. Through trial and errors, some, such as YI and CI, learned the etiquette of email writing and gained pragmatic competence in writing emails in English. Perceptions of the power differentials motivated many Taiwanese students to use dictionaries, revise their email drafts, and search topic-related information online to compensate for their underprivileged linguistic and cultural status. However, the detached, academic style that they had learned in their previous English classes did not always work to reduce the power differentials. Instead, they found the colloquial, playful language discouraged in academic prose sometimes worked for shortening their social proximity with the American students. Communicating in emails, a genre different from academic prose, taught some students the importance of making varied stylistic choices when context or genre changes.

The findings of the present study bear important implications for the use of emails and other CMC technologies to teach writing cross-nationally. First, students who are privileged in terms of the target culture, language, computer literacy or domain knowledge should be encouraged to be careful about showing it off. The underpowered – those with less expert, legitimacy, and referent power – may be inclined to interpret any form of power demonstration negatively. They can be sensitive and vulnerable when they perceive themselves subordinate in a power relation. Second, the less powered, often the NNES students, should develop both discursive and nondiscursive strategies of negation in online communication. Mastering various computer-mediated tools, such as emails, blogs, message boards, and text-messaging, may help reduce power differentials in the communication (Bloch, 2002; You, 2007). In addition, NNES students should develop rhetorical knowledge and sensitivity in formality, politeness, hedges, boosters, and so on and to make culturally appropriate and contextually effective linguistic choices. Using simple present tense, making opinionated comments, and overusing collective pronouns has the potential to hinder cross-national communication. Third, both NNES and NES students need to be taught about the diverse variants of English across the world and the

growing importance attached to multidialectalism (Matsuda & Matsuda, 2010; You, 2010; Warschauer, 2000). Only when both groups can truly appreciate each other's accented English can power differentials be reduced and better managed in the online space.

The present study has a few limitations. First, gender might have played a role in the students' perceptions and negotiations of power differentials. But because none of the students, both the Taiwanese and the American, discussed it in their emails, reflections, or interviews, the gender issue has not been addressed. Second, because the student emails examined in the study were self-selected, those that contained intimate conversations or hostile messages might not have been submitted by the students, a possibility which has hindered more in-depth analysis of the discursive strategies used under each interactional style. Third, this research has largely focused on the Taiwanese students' perceptions and negotiations of power differentials. Therefore, future studies can investigate NES students' perceptions and negotiations.

Conclusion

While the CMC tools offer students new media and new genres (Swales & Feak, 2000) to compose and to communicate across national borders, they also bring forth issues less salient in traditional classrooms. As digital technologies bring students of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds into one educational space, the power relations among students have emerged as an issue for L2 writing.

The present study has investigated this emergent issue in a cross-national writing activity. The study affirms the prevalence of power differentials in the online space, which was recognized by both the American and the Taiwanese students. Depending on their perceptions of the power differentials and their interactional style, all the students, particularly the Taiwanese students, adopted varied discursive and non-discursive strategies to negotiate the power differentials. Their negotiations call our attention to the power issue associated with teaching L2 writing in cross-national spaces. I hope that the present study will encourage more researchers to examine power issues among the students contextually in teaching and to prepare students to negotiate power differentials in cross-national spaces.

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Appendix A. Survey on the email writing activity (I)

1. Are you a native speaker of English? (1) Yes; (2) No
2. During the email exchange activity, did you enjoy sharing your personal interests and/or feelings with your key-pals? (1) Yes; (2) No
3. During your email exchange activity, did your key-pal enjoy sharing his/her personal interests or feelings? (1) Yes; (2) No
4. For any reason, did you ever feel unequal relations between you and your key-pal(s) during your communication? Did you ever feel that your key-pal was superior/inferior to you? Why or why not?
5. Did you notice any identity changes during your email communication? What identities did you create behind the screen to communicate with the foreign friend?
6. What identities or images of your correspondents did you perceive?
7. What problems did you encounter during the email exchange activity?
8. What have you done in order to facilitate your cross-cultural communication? Please describe all the efforts made or strategies used to facilitate your communication, such as using a dictionary, researching information, asking questions, sharing personal interests, etc.

Appendix B. Survey on the email writing activity (II)

1. Do you prefer to use computer-mediated tools to build a more personal relationship with your foreign key pals? (1) Yes; (2) No

2. What was your expectation coming into this cross-cultural email exchange with your foreign key-pals? (1) Making friends; (2) Learning culture
3. What's your expectation after this cross-cultural email exchange with your foreign key-pals? (1) Making friends; (2) Learning culture
4. Did you have difficulty understanding your key-pal's English? (1) Yes; (2) No
5. What strategies did you use to improve communication?

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