

FACTORS AFFECTING CONVERSATIONAL OPENINGS IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE

Hoang Tra My

Central University of Construction; hoangtramy.hn@gmail.com

Abstract - The Vietnamese often confront countless obstacles when communicating in English, especially in opening a conversation. In view of helping learners of English overcome these difficulties, this article aims at finding out similarities and differences in elements which exert influence on conversational openings by the English and the Vietnamese. As a contrastive analysis, the article restores the quantitative method to collect data by conducting a survey questionnaire. From the statistics and analysis, some significant and practical conclusions are reached: (1) the English are more active in approaching others than the Vietnamese; (2) when choosing a partner for conversational openings, the English only pay attention to familiarity while the Vietnamese regard lots of issues related to familiarity, gender, age and social status; (3) The English seem to be more reluctant to begin a conversation in particular situations than the Vietnamese; (4) both of them think of conversational openings as a way to be more social and friendly and particularly, the Vietnamese also learn and benefit from this process; (5) while the English often lack topics for talking and are afraid of interfering others' privacy; the Vietnamese mainly lack ways to attract others' attention.

Key words - conversational opening; conversational opening factors; conversational analysis; conversational factors; Vietnamese conversations; English conversations.

1. Introduction

1.1. Aims of the study

For a long time, the Vietnamese have learnt English and tried to master it; however, they still encounter lots of difficulties when communicating with foreigners; especially when opening a conversation. This article, consequently, deals with the question: "What are factors affecting conversational openings in English and Vietnamese?" The results from this study raise learners' awareness about elements impacting conversational opening process and help them to avoid these errors.

1.2. Literature Review

Related to the field of conversational openings, lots of researches have been carried out in different perspectives. Interestingly, there are a great number of studies about conversational openings of telephone or cell phone; however, the number of studies on face-to-face conversational openings is extremely limited around the world and especially in Vietnam. Generally, the beginning of conversations has been of considerable attention in the fields of sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and conversation analysis (Laver, J. & Hucheson, S. eds., 1972; Coulmas, 1981; Laver, 1981; Schegloff, 1986; Coupland et al., 1992).

The opening of a face-to-face interaction is an exceedingly essential process because through it, parties create, recreate and maintain social relationships (Pillet-Shore, 2008). This issue has been investigated by lots of researchers and educators in different languages. Edmundson and House (1981) studied common

characteristics of the opening talks through simplistic structures of exchanging regarding types of situations and social distances of participants. In more details, Omar, A. S. (1993) emphasized age as an important factor in this process while Solomon (1997) paid much attention to opening phrases in terms of three kinds of impact: interpersonal, textual and ideational. Practically, Wardhaugh (1986) suggested numerous strategies and factors affecting good openings for conversations. Significantly, he divided conversations into two types; one is among intimate people and the other among strangers and he preferred conversations conducted by strangers due to their challenges and risks.

In Vietnam, the topics concerning to conversational openings have examined sparsely. Firstly, Tram, N. (2002) laid foundation for face-to-face conversational openings by carrying out a study on "conversational openings in English and Vietnamese" in the light of pragmatics and dealing with most issues related to the topic. Secondly, in the light of conversation analysis, Tam, C. (1995) stated that conversational openings in Vietnamese include greetings, health inquiries, destination requests and invitation or offer for a cup of tea. Thirdly, Tinh, P. (2000) added by supposing that somegreeting utterances bear a very interesting pragmatic value for further conversations. Finally, Huyen, V. (2009) compared and contrasted similarities and differences in greeting ways by Vietnamese and American.

1.3. Methodology

The study is carried out basing on the quantitative method through a survey questionnaire. The survey questionnaire includes six situations which are habitual and familiar to everyone. In each situation, informants are asked to tick options designed or to give their own ideas.

The study aims to compare and contrast factors affecting conversational opening process in English and Vietnamese; hence, participants are from Vietnam and from English speaking countries such as Canada, Australia, America and Britain. Because participants must be various in terms of age, gender, social status and jobs, the author decided to deliver the survey questionnaire via the Internet thanks to the help from lots of friends. There are 100 informants in total, 50 Vietnamese (25 males and 25 females) and 50 English (25 males and 25 females). They are working in numerous fields such as education, health, tourism, science, etc and living in Vietnam or in English speaking countries. Especially, informants' private information like age, jobs, gender, sex and nationality is required in the survey questionnaire to function as a base for the analysis process.

2. Results and Discussion

2.1. Preference for Conversational Openings

Table 1. Preference for Conversational Openings English and Vietnamese

Preference	Approaching	Waiting for someone	Not talking	Total
English	28 (56%)	16 (32%)	6 (12%)	50 (100%)
Vietnamese	20 (40%)	22 (44%)	8 (16%)	50 (100%)

Preference for opening a conversation means whether participants feel like approaching and begin a conversation with others or they just want to wait for others' approaching, or else they enjoy being alone and hate having conversations in public settings.

The results reveal that a small number of English and Vietnamese speakers (12% and 16% respectively) do not like conversations or most of them prefer having conversations in public situations because, as stated above, opening conversations is one way for people to create, recreate and maintain social relationships (Pillet-Shore, 2008). Although both of groups like talking, the attitudes towards approaching someone to start conversations or waiting for others' approaches are rather different in two countries. 56% of the English speakers want to approach others for conversations while only 32% of them decide to wait for others' approach. The numbers in Vietnamese are rather different with 40% approaching and 44% waiting for others'. These differences can be explained by the cultural diversity. The English or Westerners are much opener and more active than the Vietnamese or Asians, then they feel freer to start a conversation first. Furthermore, Western women are confident and often feel open to be the first to begin a conversation with partners of the same or opposite sex. Unlike Westerners, Vietnamese women may be regarded as less modest and attractive to begin conversations with men first; hence, they are inclined to wait for others.

2.2. The Choice of Participants for Conversational Openings

When being at a public setting, speakers have various choices of partners for opening a conversation. Normally, speakers tend take into some considerations before approaching others such as the level of familiarity, gender, age and social status. The English and the Vietnamese have rather different tastes in selecting partners for conversational openings. These differences are presented in the following table:

Table 2. The choice of participants for conversational openings of English and Vietnamese

	English	Vietnamese
Stranger	11 (22%)	9 (18%)
Familiar people	20 (40%)	30 (60%)
Depend	19 (38%)	11 (22%)
Older people	9 (18%)	27 (54%)
Younger people	11 (22%)	12 (24%)
Doesn't matter	30 (60%)	11 (22%)
Lower status people	11 (22%)	15 (30%)
Higher status people	7 (14%)	29 (58%)
Doesn't matter	32 (64%)	6 (12%)

	Male	Female	Male	Female
Same sex	2 (8%)	5 (20%)	3 (12%)	19 (76%)
Opposite sex	17 (68%)	4 (16%)	16 (64%)	3 (12%)
Doesn't matter	6 (24%)	16 (64%)	6 (24%)	3 (12%)

2.2.1. In terms of Strangeness and Familiarity

The matter of familiarity and strangeness in opening a conversation is examined through the second question, in which, participants will choose people who they want to begin conversations with in public settings. The statistics show that most of the English and Vietnamese participants (40% and 60% respectively) choose familiar people while a small number of them (22% of English and 18% of Vietnamese) would like to begin conversations with strangers. People of intimacy are much more preferable because of the comfort, confidence and relaxation obtained from shared background knowledge between or among speakers. It is, therefore, easier for participants to find out appropriate and interesting topics, to avoid misunderstanding and to keep embarrassment away. However, to contrast two countries, Vietnamese speakers prefer talking with people of intimacy more than English ones. This can be mainly explained through different reactions of English and Vietnamese females towards talking with strangers. While English female feel free to talk to unknown people, Vietnamese ones are afraid of them due to the feelings of security and comfort.

Significantly, the number of English people ticks the "depend" column more than the number of Vietnamese ones (38% and 22% respectively). It is explainable through the different feelings of people in two countries. In the view of Westerners, having a conversation or not depends partly on situations and time for contact and largely on their mood. To them, having conversation means relaxing, fun and delight. The Vietnamese, in contrast, regard starting a conversation as a means to become social, to make friends or to learn. In other words, they are quite motive when deciding to begin a conversation or not.

2.2.2. In terms of Gender

As it can be seen, gender has an exceedingly significant effect on the choice of participants for conversational openings. Specially, reactions from men are totally different from women in both countries.

English and Vietnamese women have contradictory attitudes towards choosing partners for conversations. While most English females (64%) do not care about gender, Vietnamese ones (76%) tend to choose partners in the same sex. Traditionally, Vietnamese women are regarded as the weaker sex and they are expected to behave gracefully and delicately in public places. Specially, a woman who talks with a man first may be seen as open, casual and easy-going or this behavior is inadvisable in Vietnamese culture. Furthermore, opening a conversation is rather challenging, for this reason, a partner of the same sex seems safer and more comfortable thanks to shared topics and interests. In contrast, 64% English women choose partners to communicate disregarding of gender owing to their informal and broad-minded lifestyle.

Surprisingly, despite cultural diversity, English and Vietnamese men share the remarkably similar point of views towards choosing partners to open conversations. They tend to avoid people of the same sex (8% of the English and 12% of the Vietnamese) but prefer ones of the opposite sex (68% of English and 64% of Vietnamese). This is mainly due to the general image of men as the stronger and more active sex. In addition, most men love discovering and in their eyes, women are more charming and attracting to know about. For the last reason, chats between or among men are quiet monotony and boring so most men would like to avoid them.

2.2.3. In terms of Age

According to the statistics, age has a notably different impact on choosing a conversational partner by English and Vietnamese. 60% of English think that age is not the matter in conversational openings while the number of Vietnamese is only 22%. This reveals that Vietnamese bear an opposite opinion by showing a high respect of age or generation when beginning a conversation.

Naturally, when start talking, the Vietnamese are in favor of the older people (with 54%) instead of the younger ones (with 24%). In Vietnamese culture, it is nice and wise to greet and talk to the older first due to the respect of their age, experience and knowledge. However, there are still 24% of Vietnamese informants selecting a younger partner, which may be for fun or relaxation. Inversely, the numbers of English informants choosing the older and the younger are rather similar with 18% and 22% respectively. This proves that age has not exerted much influence on their choice of partners for conversational openings.

2.2.4. In terms of Social Status

In terms of social status, the English and the Vietnamese have contradictory opinions when choosing partners for opening a conversation. It is explainable when most English speakers do not care about social status in communication (with 64%). In Western culture, freedom and justice are particularly appreciated; hence, people dislike discriminating against people of lower status. They even love talking to them (with 22%) more than people of higher status (with only 14%) because they want to discover differences and to enjoy the comfort. In contrast, Vietnamese pay much attention to social status (only 12% tick "doesn't matter" column), in fact, they are in favor of people in higher status (with 58%) than people of lower status (with 30%). This phenomenon is partly due to the respect of their success, proficiency and prosperousness and partly due to the inquisitive spirit.

2.3. The Choice of Situations for Conversational Openings

Table 3. Situations Influencing Conversational Openings in English and Vietnamese

	Situ a	Situ b	Situ c	Situ d	Total
E	37 (74%)	42 (84%)	3 (6%)	8 (16%)	90
V	29 (58%)	33 (66%)	18 (36%)	27 (54%)	107

E: English; V: Vietnamese; Situ: Situation

Question 4 is designed in order to find out situations in which conversations are often opened easily in English and

Vietnamese cultures. For limited time and study scope, only four significant situations are examined. In this question, informants will tick the situations in which they feel easy to open a conversation and they can tick more than one option. Totally, the English tick 90 options while the Vietnamese tick 107 ones, these numbers reveal that although the English are more open-minded than the Vietnamese, they are more reluctant to approach others for conversations; furthermore, unlike the Vietnamese, the English tend to avoid talking to others in particular situations.

In the first and the second situations, the English and the Vietnamese have rather similar reactions. When people are alone "on a train" or "at the party", they are much opener to have a conversation with others. When being on a train, participants usually enjoy chatting (with 74% of the English and 58% of the Vietnamese) as it is an excellent way to pass time and a beneficial chance to learn from others. Furthermore, 84% of English and 66% of Vietnamese speakers feel it easy to open a conversation at a party because in this situation, most informants are often around the same age, same social status and share common interests. Furthermore, they are enjoying nice atmosphere with foods, drinks, music and especially surrounded with cheerful mood participants. All these things make parties fascinating and interesting occasions for conversations.

In the third and the fourth situations, reactions of English and Vietnamese are completely opposite. When "being in a queue" or "waiting for an interview", English often avoid talking with others; however, Vietnamese feel quite comfortable to begin a conversation. Only 6% of English want to open a conversation in a queue while the number of Vietnamese surpasses by 36%. In fact, in Western countries, everyone is familiar with queuing and it even becomes their custom. Additionally, Westerners always respect others' freedom and privacy; as a result, they avoid disturbing others by keeping silence. Vietnamese behavior is opposing because they are not accustomed to queuing or else it is regarded as a strange phenomenon; consequently, the Vietnamese tend to complain about the inconvenience or they begin a conversation just as a way of passing unpleasant time.

When waiting for an interview, the English have the same responses as when they are in a queue (with only 16% choosing conversational openings). In this case, English are rather stressful and they want to concentrate on their up-coming interview and prefer being alone instead of talking with others. Unlike the English, 54% of the Vietnamese like a conversation before an interview since talking is a way for them to keep calm and relax before entering the interview room. Besides, participants also hope to learn from others' experience and knowledge to foster their coming interview.

2.4. Purposes of Opening a Conversation

Although there are numerous purposes for people to begin a conversation, only common ones are analyzed in the scope of this study. The most prevalent aim for a conversational opening is to promote participants to become more social. For a long time, people have taken

advantage to create, recreate and maintain social relationships. Most of the English and Vietnamese informants (84% and 78% respectively) approach others due to the acquirement of this function of conversation. Secondly, people often have more and more friends through communication. This is the reason why 24% of English and 18% of Vietnamese consider beginning a conversation as a way of making friends. Thirdly, the numbers of English and Vietnamese regard starting a conversation as a way to break the silence are slightly different with 18% and 36% respectively. This is because for English, silence sometimes means freedom and privacy; hence, in some circumstances, they may be afraid of interfering others if talking to them. Vietnamese, inversely, hate silence and in some situations, silence makes participants embarrassed and uncomfortable. For this reason, many of them want to break or get rid of it. Finally, the last situation expresses the most different attitudes of English and Vietnamese towards learning purpose through conversational openings. While only 16% of English want to study from conversations; 46% of Vietnamese can benefit from them. In the view of the English, conversations in public settings are just for fun, entertainment and delight because it is time for them to relax or enjoy outdoor activities, not to study. The Vietnamese have an opposite view by considering conversations a resource for learning and discovering. In fact, the Vietnamese learn mainly from life, from normal people rather than from schools and teachers or books. In a consequence, they take advantage of any chances to learn from others through conversational openings.

Table 4. *Purposes of Conversational Openings of English and Vietnamese*

	English	Vietnamese
To become socialize	84%	78%
To make friends	24%	18%
To break the silence	18%	36%
To learn from others	16%	46%

2.5. Difficulties in Opening a Conversation

In question 6, some difficulties in opening a conversation are suggested and informants can tick more than one options and add more problems if have. Surprisingly, although opening a conversation is supposed to be a risky task, the number of English and Vietnamese informants who are sure to encounter no obstacles in this process is rather high (26% and 22% respectively). This is because these people are accustomed to social contacts through their jobs such as businessmen, drivers, teachers, tour-guide, etc.

Table 5. *English and Vietnamese Difficulties in Conversational Openings*

	English	Vietnamese
Having no difficulties	13 (26%)	11 (22%)
Being lack of topics	19 (38%)	13 (26%)
Being lack of ways	18 (36%)	24 (48%)
Affecting others' privacy	31 (62%)	12 (24%)

In terms of difficulties, while 38% of the English are

short of appropriate topics for conversational openings; 48% of Vietnamese lack ways to express their thoughts. In Western culture, there are too many topics regarded as impolite or even rude when mentioned in public places. Unlike the English, topics are not big barriers for the Vietnamese; for them, handling ways for conversational openings is rather problematic (with 48%). This difficulty is because the Vietnamese have to consider lots of factors such as age, social status, gender and so on when beginning conversations and the ways they speak to different partners are totally different.

In terms of problems related to privacy, most of the English speakers (62%) are afraid of invading someone's private while only 24% of the Vietnamese are hesitant to interfere others in case they are in silence. Westerners tend to respect others' freedom and privacy; as a consequence, they often consider carefully before interacting with others. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, dislike silence and they incline to break it.

3. Conclusion

From all the statistics and analysis above, some general conclusions can be reached in terms of factors affecting conversational openings of the English and the Vietnamese. After examining these factors, some similarities and differences between two languages are regarded and noted to function as guidelines for the Vietnamese to learn and use English in their study, their work and their daily life.

In terms of preference for conversational openings, although both the English and the Vietnamese enjoy communicating with others in public settings, the English approach others actively while the Vietnamese often wait for others' openings.

In terms of the choice of partners to open a conversation with, firstly, both the English and the Vietnamese are inclined to talk to familiar people instead of strangers since familiarity often brings comfort, confidence and relaxation to speakers. Secondly, English women do not care much about the gender of their partners owing to their open lifestyle but Vietnamese women are favored to start a conversation with partners of the same sex to be regarded as delicate and graceful. Interestingly, both English and Vietnamese men bear the same attitudes when choosing females instead of males as their partners for conversational openings. This similarity is because men all over the world are thought as stronger and more active sex and also because men often find women more charming and attracting. Thirdly, in Vietnamese or in Asian cultures, people highly appreciate age and social status; for this reason, most of the informants are prone to begin conversations with those people. Contradictorily, in English or in Western cultures, people are free and open so they choose partners for communication just for entertainment and relaxation.

In terms of situations for opening a conversation, English, contrary to our expectation, are more hesitant to start a conversation in some cases to show the respect of others' freedom and privacy. Unlike them, Vietnamese

seem to be ready for conversations in most situations in public settings.

In terms of purposes, most the English and the Vietnamese share the same points of view by regarding conversational openings as a way to make themselves more social and friendly and some of them regard conversational openings as a means to break silence. However, while many Vietnamese begin conversations to learn and benefit from others; the English communicate just for fun and delight.

In terms of difficulties, the English are lack of topics for beginning but the Vietnamese are short of methods to express themselves. Moreover, whilst the Vietnamese feel rather free to contact others, the English fear to interfering others' privacy.

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