Telling Stories and Making Social Relations: Transnational Women’s Ways of Belonging in Intercultural Contexts

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This study investigates how transnational women construct their social relations by telling stories in a lingua franca environment (Firth 1996). My main interest lies in naturally occurring and interactionally achieved stories (Bamberg 2004; Georgakopoulou 2007) told during break time of an adult English as a Second Language (ESL) class in Honolulu. I investigate how seven learners find common ground for belonging by telling stories as a means of active participation. The process of cultural belonging and participation is examined by way of narrative analysis—a concrete, visible, and discursive method for analyzing participants’ daily interactions. By utilizing the dimensions of storytelling, which are embeddedness, tellership, and tellability (Ochs and Capps 2001; Georgakopoulou 2007) I seek to examine how the women construct their social relations and what social actions and goals their stories produce in the interaction. The women locate common concerns and complaints, using their stories to build a familiar, safe, and comfortable environment in which to practice their new lingua franca.

INTRODUCTION

Transnational individuals and their life stories have become a fascinating area of inquiry in applied linguistics and second language studies (Norton 2000; Pavlenko 2001; Gordon 2004; Menard-Warwick 2005; Fougère 2008). The word ‘transnational’ means condition of interconnectedness and mobility across national borders (Ong 1999; Risager 2007; Kumaravadivelu 2008; Menard-Warwick 2008), and refers to the process by which people forge and sustain multistranded social relations that link together their different orientations (Basch et al. 1994). Their narratives show dynamic aspects of multilingualism, multiple selves, and multiple belonging. In addition, since this term extends beyond national boundaries, it fits with the current research interests in a lingua franca zone (Firth 1996; Firth and Wagner 1997; Canagarajah 2007).

Researchers have focused on the agentive ways that women have found spaces to construct identities in new contexts (Ruiz and Tiano 1987; Norton 2000; Moon 2003; Gordon 2004; Menard-Warwick 2004, 2008; Pastor and
De Fina 2005; Rhee 2006). Many of these studies have discussed identity shifts among people and have shown how they represent the world through their narratives. These studies examine the dynamic processes and performances through which identity, place, and belonging are constructed in and through discourses. The meaning of language learning extends to larger social contexts. As an example, some narrative studies discuss second language learning as gendered practice by focusing on how participants bring different gender ideologies to language learning contexts (Norton 2000; Menard-Warwick 2004, 2008).

GENDERED IDENTITY

Among the various identities that emerged from the stories told, I am particularly interested in investigating how the participants constructed their gendered identity. Gendered identity construction in immigrant contexts has a body of literature in applied linguistics (Hirsh 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003; Gordon 2004; Cameron 2005; Menard-Warwick 2009). Previous studies on language learning and gender in migration have investigated how language learning is influenced by and in turn influences identity shifts. However, we still lack sufficient attention to the immigrant women’s daily interaction with each other in various social contexts and need more investigation on how they access language resources and utilize them in (re)constructing their gendered identities. I follow Menard-Warwick’s use of the term ‘gendered identity’ (Menard-Warwick 2009: 27) instead of ‘gender identity’, because this choice reveals the emphasis on gender in relation to other identities. In other words, gender cannot be isolated from other identities. In the process of storytelling, the participants’ intercultural identities emerge and interplay with gender identity, which makes gender more complex. Additionally, local forms of gender are socially constructed in the participants’ regular interactions in multiple ways, which brings the diversity of gendered identities and practices (Cameron 2005).

This study investigates the local production of gendered identities through the process of collaborative storytelling. I explore how immigrant women construct their social identities and relations by telling stories during break time in an adult English class. My main interest lies in naturally and interactionally achieved stories (Bamberg 2004; Georgakopoulou 2006, 2007). More than a text constituted of chains of temporally and causally ordered events, a story is a way of generating social reality and showing the participants’ understanding of social reality. When analyzing a story, I view it not as a tool or technique but rather as a particular way of constructing knowledge and experience, which inherently links to what is accomplished in a particular social context (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012).

A benefit of analyzing interactional narratives is that we can closely see how stories are told in a collaborative way among the participants. The reason why collaborative storytelling is a rich site for the study of L2 use, identity making,
and/or Lingua Franca interaction is that people collectively (re)define their identities and construct social relations through this form of discourse.

**TRANSNATIONALISM**

It is important to frame my study in transnationalism because the women’s physical and social relocation and intercultural experiences are frequently observed as topics of stories and interactional resources in the group. I discuss how the participants’ complex multiple identities across gender and ethnicity, as well as their social relations, emerged in the processes of their migration.

The participants’ stories often included elements of transnational mobility. The stories often engaged communities beyond those in Hawai‘i or those characterized by certain ethnicities or local cultures. The participants referenced other communities in their storytelling; they visited their home countries in order to care for their families (e.g. mother-in-law in Japan) or for business (e.g. import/export beauty products). Then they shared their account from their intercultural experiences. These physical movements add intercultural experiences and comparative perspectives, which work as linguistic and cultural resources in the interaction.

**COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE AND CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL RELATIONS**

This study builds on L2 identity research focusing on Communities of Practice (CoP) (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; Wenger *et al.* 2002), a powerful framework for connecting social belonging and participation into one construct. Communities are ‘groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis’ (Wenger *et al.* 2002: 4). Women in this study engaged with one another in a lingua franca zone and shared their goals, activities, and linguistic repertoires by telling stories. Georgakopoulou’s (2006) description of storytelling within a CoP fits very well with the case of participants’ stories and communities:

> As a CoP, the participants over a period of regular contact and socialization have developed shared ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs and values. This is a repertoire of shared but negotiable resources that can be put to interactional use in order to constitute group membership, roles, and relations (Georgakopoulou 2006: 99).

By critically observing the meaning of community in CoP, I want to challenge, reshape, and complement the concept of participation. In many studies that make use of the CoP model, the notion of participation is used for explaining that the participants undertake not only the reconstruction of their identities
but also the acculturation of the new cultural environment. Yet, being a member of a new community does not necessarily involve only the target culture or unidirectional forms of socialization. Duff (2007) verifies concerns about overly simplistic understandings of community and membership in her study of community of practice orientation to second language socialization. She emphasizes that ‘socialization does not necessarily lead to the reproduction of existing L2 cultural and discursive practices but may lead to other outcomes, such as hybrid practices, identities, and values’ (311). This idea reveals that socialization is not unidirectional toward certain CoP norms, but rather it is complex and multidirectional.

Hence, I expand on the concept of participation and CoP as it has been used in L2 studies to argue that affiliation and belonging can be applied to alternative spaces such as in lingua franca interactions where speakers who share neither a common native language nor a common culture use English as their regular means of communication. Their mutual engagement in the activity of storytelling provides the foundation for cultural and social belongings. A community emerges out of the interaction of its members with one another. However, participation in this new community is not limited to the members’ status as participants, but instead constitutes a profound struggle to find or create new discursive spaces in which to construct or reconstruct social relations. Additionally, social involvement as a member of a community is a continuing trajectory toward full membership, but it does not necessarily carry the result of successfully achieved membership.

As my data reveal, break time during an ESL class can provide a new zone for belonging that does not necessarily involve the target culture. The participants’ interactions appear to discursively create a ‘space’ (Kramsch 1993; Bhabha 1994) in which they form their identities and social relations, rather than maintaining their first language/first culture (L1/C1) or adapting to a ‘targetlike’ second language/second culture (L2/C2). During the break time, participants’ cultural knowledge and experiences are shared and contested in ways that are relatively free from institutional constraints. Negotiating identities and finding common ground are the key practices in this intercultural space.

LINGUA FRANCA ENGLISH AND BREAK TIME INTERACTION

I view break time in immigrant ESL class as a lingua franca space (Firth 1996; Firth and Wagner 1997; Canagarajah 2007), where hybrid linguistic and cultural knowledge and work orders are formed, exchanged, and practiced. Break time is the place where speakers who share neither a common native language nor a common culture choose to use English as their regular means of communication. The lingua franca zone serves as a place where the goals of establishing companionship and making friends are carried out. The speakers collaboratively communicate with each other and provide interactive and reciprocal assistance. The features of break time are different from other lingua
franca zones such as a temporal business setting for work-related talk (Firth 1996) or an educational setting for teaching English. In light of these distinctive features, I aim to discuss the real benefits of observing break time and what/how women achieve their interactional goals in this time and place.

By occupying a mutually rewarding intercultural space, the women fostered companionship in a spirit of togetherness. In analyzing interactional narratives, the matter of crossing ethnic lines, or identifying people (or being identified) based on their L1/C1 appears relatively inconsequential. In fact, sometimes the dichotomy between ethnic inclusion and exclusion is challenged, and participants’ ethnic/national boundaries become irrelevant. Gendered identities were generally more salient than ethnic identities as in most of the examples in this study. More often than identifying with a particular culture or ethnicity, the participants construct other relevant identities such as being a good housewife, a good mother, or a good friend.

This study allows for the opening of a new discursive space where multi-party storytelling is considered to be a rich resource to observe what people do in their specific spatial and temporal contexts. The women in this study very often used this setting as a location in which to voice complaints. The female participants complained about their bodies, husbands, and mothers-in-law and they negotiated spaces for belonging through telling stories about shared experiences and points of view. I intend to focus on how discursive collaboration among women functions as a site of belonging and identity making among L2 English speakers. I am particularly interested in analyzing how they engage with each other, take turns, and participate in an activity that is arguably significant to their own identity formation.

BREAK TIME AS INTERCULTURAL SPACE

ESL classes and immigrant learners have been examined in many studies, and these studies have enlarged the classroom spotlight to include learners’ shifting identities. Immigrant ESL classes potentially offer space for identity construction, but I point out that identity options for L2 speakers are somewhat limited. I turn to an investigation of break time in an adult ESL class in order to explore what identity options emerge for L2 users in more naturally occurring interactions. Sharing stories in this specific sphere is associated with varying degrees of accessibility, participation, expectations, and norms about what is or is not licensed. Within a specific context like break time in an ESL class, the participants achieve their social and cultural orientation through the practice of telling stories.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

I make use of scholarship on interactional narratives (Goodwin 1984, 1986; Bamberg and Marchman 1991; Wortham 2000; Ochs and Capps 2001; Bamberg 2004; Georgakopoulou 2006, 2007; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008) for analyzing women’s interactional stories. I seek to examine how
women construct their social relations through their stories and to identify what social actions and goals their stories produce in their interactions. By its literal and metaphorical comparison with big stories of fully fledged life events, the concept of small story (Georgakopoulou 2007) supports my idea of what a story is. Stories capture fleeting moments of the narratives and under-representing telling activities including telling of ongoing, future or hypothetical events (Georgakopoulou 2006). A story also integrally links to participants’ shared (known) or unshared (unknown) knowledge as a story embraces ‘allusions to tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell’ (p.123).

My analytical method is to examine how stories are elicited, contextualized, and deployed by the participants. By examining different story dimensions, I focus on how a story is contextualized, in what ways a story is told by the participants, and how a story offers a space for performing identities. Analyzing the interactional features can answer the questions of how participants become involved in storytelling and how they establish their social relations. The stories in this study are from ordinary conversational contexts which are based on the storytellers’ shared interactional histories (Georgakopoulou 2007). In order to investigate how the participants use break time to establish spaces for belonging, I introduce the dimensions of interactive narratives: embeddedness, tellership, and tellability (Ochs and Capps 2001; Georgakopoulou 2007). These three dimensions will be more closely discussed next.

(1) Embeddedness: Embeddedness shows how dependent a story is on surrounding context and to what extent it attaches to the local surrounding, discourse, and social activity (Ochs and Capps 2001). The data in this study demonstrate a story is produced in a particular context and cultural features within the context emerge in telling stories.

(2) Tellership: Participants become co-tellers and make contributions to telling a story. Tellership refers to ‘the extent and kind of involvement of conversational partners in the actual recounting of a narrative’ (Ochs and Capps 2001: 24). Participants in storytelling vary their involvement from displaying cursory attentiveness to requesting narrative details. I am interested in exploring how participants gain co-tellership as a way of asserting their belonging in a group.

(3) Tellability: Tellability is the participants’ orientation to what locally constitutes a tellable story (Georgakopoulou 2007). It captures the aesthetic, affective, and subjective aspects of narrative. It links to the significance of events for particular interlocutors and the way in which events are shaped in narrative (Kiesling 2006; Menard-Warwick 2007). A story becomes meaningful when it carries significance of the event. The significance of the story, tellability, is tightly related to the given context of telling. I particularly focus on what I term ‘complainability’ in women’s stories, as it is a dominant feature of their interactions. How women’s complaints become meaningful and continuously and extensively told in this particular group is one of my analytical focuses.
Different narrative scholars have also engaged with similar concepts of narrative dimensions including tellership (how people tell) and tellability (what people tell). With different emphases, how a story becomes tellable and hearable, and how a storyteller has authorship have been widely discussed by other narrative scholars (Bamberg 1997; Norrick 2000; Wortham 2001). Based on these interactional dimensions, I analyze locally accomplished and jointly constructed stories to more closely explore how the women construct their social realities. These story dimensions imply that some stories can be elaborated, developed, and completed, but they also show that stories are sometimes constrained by the form, content and purpose of ongoing social activities among members. Exploring these dimensions, how people tell and what people tell, captures the dynamic participation of storytelling and reveals how people claim their belonging in their community.

THE STUDY

This research was conducted at a community school for immigrant adults in Honolulu, Hawaii. This school is located in the downtown area of the city and is supported by the Department of Education. Conducted in 2008 and 2009, this study was motivated by my experiences as an ESL teacher at the community school. The participants are oriented to the local context of Hawaii and utilize the local cultural and linguistic resources to build a shared ground for telling their stories. Within this shared local context, the participants construct their intercultural identities and social relations. I observed that a language class functions more than simply a locus for language acquisition, but rather as a place where learners construct their social relations through interacting with each other.

The goal of the class is to increase immigrants’ linguistic and cultural socialization process so that they can find employment. However, regardless of the school’s mission, many of the students had been attending this free ESL program for many years not only to study English but also to build and maintain their social relations. I collected data during the break time in one of the advanced ESL classes I taught, which mainly focused on teaching communicative skills. Students met 4 days per week for 3 hours per session. They knew each other very well and behaved more like close friends than classmates. From my observation, students got together and had conversations during the 15–20 min break time, grouping themselves based on their interests, closeness, and ethnic backgrounds. Their regular socializing over a long period of time created a dense interactional history that often emerged in their stories. Students looked upon class breaks as a time in which they could unreservedly tell stories about their daily lives, share information, and consult with one another about their life concerns.

I asked students to self-record their stories during the break time, and then to return the recording device to me. I was not involved in the conversation because I usually spent this time preparing for the next class in the teacher’s room.
Most of the participants involved in the data collection were women. Among the data collected, 13 out of 29 were multi-party interactions including more than two people in a group, while the rest of the data consisted of pair interactions. I chose to analyze the multi-party storytelling data to examine more dynamically co-drafted and co-authored stories. Furthermore, considering Georgakopoulou’s (2007) emphasis on the significance of the storytellers’ shared interactional history, I selected the same group of participants who frequently got together and shared their private stories, rather than newly and randomly created groups in the class.

Participants

The women who were involved in this study were Aya, Keiko, Masako, Mayumi, Sunju, and Yeon. They were very close since they had known each other for several years. Jay, a young Chinese man, had just joined the class and participated mostly as a listener. In the following table (Table 1), I list more details about the participants to provide relevant background information for making sense of their stories and their interactional dynamics during break time.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data showed that women brought their knowledge or expertise to their break time groups. By showing and sharing their cultural resources, they got opportunities to tell their stories. Sometimes they did not fully participate and were marginalized, or the groups even broke down because of the constraints in their shared experience. Some members also chose to exclude themselves from storytelling, placing themselves out of the groups.

Table 1: Background information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity of spouse</th>
<th>Length of the marriage</th>
<th>Number of years living in the USA</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Aya</td>
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<td>mid 40s</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>20 yr</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keiko</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>early 50s</td>
<td>Anglo-American</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masako</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>late 40s</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>24 yr</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mayumi</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>mid 40s</td>
<td>Czech</td>
<td>10 yr</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunju</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>mid 50s</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>35 yr</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yeon</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>mid 30s</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>7 yr</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>early 20s</td>
<td>N/A (Unmarried)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once the data were collected, I chose excerpts on gender-related topics that frequently appeared in the stories for in-depth analysis.
Below, I present excerpts based on the different dimensions of narratives. I discuss how the women achieve their tellership within the particular interactional space by analyzing excerpts on pregnancy, women’s complaints against their mothers-in-law, and their non-traditional husbands. I will also address the implications of the women’s collaborative participation in storytelling.

Narratives and embeddedness: contextualized interaction

Stories are anchored in a specific context, and telling stories can be studied as a process of contextualization. Georgakopoulou (2007) notes that narratives occur in different kinds of discourse environments, and these are entangled with the local surroundings. The women shared stories based on their daily lives, and the topics were culturally and socially embedded; topics included pregnancy, married life, and relationships with their in-laws. The following excerpt about Yeon’s pregnancy reveals how a story was collaboratively produced by Aya, Masako, and Sunju within a particular context where it was used to perform social actions such as building solidarity. Yeon was pregnant, and other members already knew about her pregnancy. Aya and Masako came to Yeon’s seat during break time and the interaction began when Aya asked a question.

Excerpt 1: ‘you can wear Muumuu’.

1   Aya:   so (. ) how old? (. ) how many months?
2   Yeon:   five [heehee
3   Masako:   [wo:w but you have small belly, right?
4   Aya:   yeah but maybe next month she will have a [big belly
5   Yeon:   [yeah I will
6   be a pi:g you see ( )
7   A,M,Y:   ((laughter))
8   Aya   but don’t wo:rry you can wear Muumuu though hehehe
9   A,M,Y:   ((laughter))
10  Masako: yeah nobody knows ya? Hehehehe

Yeon’s visible pregnancy is shared knowledge in this group, and Aya asks a question on how long she has been pregnant. In line 1, she repairs her question from ‘how old’ to ‘how many months’, and Yeon responds to Aya’s question. Yeon’s answer provides the information Aya wants to know. Yeon’s laughter overlaps with Masako’s compliment about Yeon’s small belly (with surprise). Masako then reveals her expert knowledge on the size of a pregnant woman’s belly and provides a comment with a comparative perspective. Ochs and Capps (2001) explain that embeddedness of narratives serves in making a
comparison or providing an example. In this particular context of women’s gathering, their experience or knowledge about pregnancy works as an embedded interactional resource.

In line 4, Masako’s comments are taken up by Aya in the form of agreement, and then Aya reveals her expertise on the size of belly, which is related to the projection of Yeon’s future state. Yeon agrees with the projection and extends it further by referring to herself as ‘a pig’, a jointly understood metaphor among the women that brings laughter in the group. In line 8, Aya takes up Yeon’s worry and advises her to wear a loose article of clothing which might conceal her big belly. This shared joke is based on the women’s knowledge of a mu’umu’u, (‘Hawaiian dress’), which is something loose enough to hide a big belly. Because the women highlight the mu’umu’u as maternity wear rather than a formal or traditional dress for the local context, their joke arguably indexes their non-local identity. Hence, this excerpt shows how storytelling is contextualized and established by the members’ shared knowledge regarding pregnancy and Hawaiian clothing. The use of insiders’ jokes brings laughter as a boundary mechanism for consolidating group culture and distinguishing insiders from outsiders (Tepper 1997). The participants co-construct their boundaries in the certain context of their social encounter. Even though pregnancy is a universally gendered topic, women utilize their local resources for constructing their social bonds.

Who is telling a story? Narratives and tellership

Tellership is a prevalent aspect of storytelling and is specifically realized as the storytellers’ right to hold the floor in the process of collaborative storytelling. Co-tellership is closely related to third turn completion, invitation, and minimal responses among interlocutors. The participants collaboratively contribute to telling stories, and this contribution links up with the social identities and various affiliations in the group. The women’s participation differs both in the degree and types of contribution. Next, in the following excerpt, I examine (1) how story structures emerge and are negotiated by multiple storytellers; and (2) how women get opportunities to participate in telling and sharing their experiences. In the following excerpt, Mayumi starts off by telling a story about her mother-in-law. The traits of mothers-in-law and Mayumi’s complaints work here as shared knowledge for married women who might go through difficulties related to in-laws.

Excerpt 2 ‘you cannot take my son hundred percent’

1 Mayumi: father was very nice to me hehe
2 but mother was very no um (. ) looks:
3 Masako: mean
4 Mayumi: yeah yeah mean [mean and and
5 Sunju: [ah
Masako: jealous?
Mayumi: yeah yeah a lot of jealous and (.) but an-
we live together but room is separated o-of course
and but she came to she came our room every:
once every thirty minutes
Aya: um
Mayumi: everyday
Sunju: oh [every
Mayumi: [everyday "everyday" so after that I[yeah
Sunju: [what you see=
Mayumi: =yeah
Sunju: what you ( )=
Mayumi: =yeah
Sunju: what you do=
Mayumi: =yeah yeah
Sunju: she want to know everything everything everything
Masako: †ah
Sunju: †ah
Mayumi: and she said you cannot take my son
Sunju: hundred percent fifty fifty is good
Sunju: is he a was he a (.) only son or?
Mayumi: only one son
Sunju: oh I see I understand ya

This excerpt shows how complaints are formulated by multiple tellers, and how shared complaints offer room for co-tellership and a discursive site for belonging. Mayumi initiates a story about her father-in-law in line 1. Masako contributes to Mayumi’s search for the right adjectives to illustrate the characteristics of mothers-in-law. The words ‘mean’ and ‘jealous’ are offered in contrast to the evaluation, ‘very nice’ that Mayumi uses to describe her father-in-law in line 1. Mayumi looks for others’ assistance, and Masako offers the two evaluative attributes. In lines 3 and 6, Masako assists Mayumi to complete her turns by providing possible words that show mothers-in-law’s personality traits. Mayumi takes them up in a very highly affiliated way. These are based on the participants’ shared knowledge of mothers-in-law’s characteristics. The women’s shared knowledge is thus the foundation for their participation.
This interaction reveals the emergent story structure and its development, which are important aspects of co-telling. Mayumi confirms the aspects of her mother-in-law’s personality that are also constructed by other members. Mayumi initiates a detailed story from line 8. Mayumi’s use of ‘every’ emphasizes the mother-in-law’s behaviors and it is taken by Aya and Sunju in lines 11 and 13. Sunju provides inferences in line 15, 17, and 19, and these inferences about the possible reasons for the mother-in-law’s ‘invasive’ behavior assist Mayumi to continue her story. At the same time, Sunju’s inferences increase the credibility of Mayumi’s irrational mother-in-law’s actions and intensify the seriousness of the case. These ideas are accepted by Mayumi and she formulates an extreme case in a repeated way in line 21. In lines 9, 10, 14, and 21, Mayumi emphasizes the wrongness of mother-in-law’s practice (Pomerantz 1986), and Sunju’s construction of inference in lines 15–19 are to propose the possible details of the story. The interplay between uses of extreme cases and inferences in the unfolding of the story helps the women claim their tellership and participate in storytelling.

In telling a story about her own mother-in-law, Mayumi offers her co-participants the opportunity to participate in co-constructing the characteristics of all mothers-in-law. We can see that Mayumi’s mother-in-law stands out in this story. Other members respond to Mayumi with surprise (rising tones in lines 22 and 23), and her story stimulates others’ curiosity, encouraging Mayumi to say more. Therefore, commonality and exceptionality co-exist as an interesting balance in this excerpt. Even though Mayumi’s mother-in-law stands out in this story, the commonality of a difficult or demanding mother-in-law is considered the participants’ interactional resource. The mother-in-law’s frequent visits are evaluated negatively by other group members. Sunju and Masako encourage Mayumi to tell her story and to add richness by asking details, and at the same time they build a ground for themselves to participate in storytelling.

After Masako and Sunju respond with surprise in lines 22 and 23, Mayumi elaborates on her mother-in-law’s jealousy with reported speech. ‘She said you cannot take my son hundred percent fifty fifty is good.’ Mayumi’s mother-in-law does not allow Mayumi to have time alone with her husband. By quoting her mother-in-law, Mayumi constructs a mother-in-law’s identity as a jealous woman in the storytelling world. At the same time, her use of reported speech serves as a powerful tool to strategically construct Mayumi herself as a pitiful and helpless daughter-in-law. Mayumi also holds the floor and keeps her tellership.

Sunju then inquires whether Mayumi’s husband is an only son in line 26. Sunju proposes the possible reason of the mother-in-law’s regular visits based on the fact that Mayumi’s husband is the only son. Sunju tries to search for a justifiable reason for Mayumi’s mother-in-law’s obsession, and after receiving Mayumi’s answer, she expresses that the mother-in-law’s behavior makes sense. Thus, without any other elaboration such as asking further questions or providing more explanations, Sunju reveals her understanding, and this
response is unnoticed by other members. Even though she says she understands the reason behind the mother-in-law’s intrusiveness, her response does not condone it. Line 28 also reveals the group’s shared understanding of the special status of an only son.

The women involve themselves in storytelling by contributing and proposing ideas about the mother-in-law. This process demonstrates how they build their affiliation based on shared experiences or shared knowledge. These women achieve commonality through taking part in the construction of a shared complaint. The participants focus on their shared understanding of the identity of ‘daughters-in-law’ who have experienced difficulties with in-laws. In the following section I will analyze the participants’ co-constructed tellership, and will explore what constitutes a tellable story. This is an important question since it is related to the significance of events for particular interlocutors and to the way in which events are shaped in narratives.

Who can make a tellable story?: narratives and tellability

Tellability refers to participants’ orientation to what locally constitutes a story, and how it is interactively achieved. Some narrative studies underscore tellability as an important dimension since it indexes the significance of the events (e.g. Kiesling 2006; Menard-Warwick 2007). The women in this study are legitimated by one another based on who can make a tellable complaint. After reading an article on shifting gender roles in different cultures in class, Sunju, Masako, Mayumi, and Keiko talked about husbands and their housework. The husbands and their lack of contribution to household duties are shared topics tellable among the women. Masako in particular complains about her husband, a topic that is taken up by the other women. The following excerpt reveals that complaining about a husband is a strategy for the women, and based on what kinds of husbands they have, they entitle each other to the interactional floor in different ways. Keiko initiates her story in the following excerpt and elaborates her atypical case.

Excerpt 3-a ‘I can’t take part in as a housewife.’

24 Keiko: uh in my case nandakke ((what do you call it))
25 my husband uh uh does do everything hehehe
26 Every house >chores< cooking, cleaning the ro:om
27 Laundry So I- I- I [have no ((smiley voice))hahaha
28 Masako: "oh::::
29 Keiko: >I am sorry< uh so nanka ((like))
30 I I think nanteyuuka ((how to call it))
31 Sunju: japanese or=
32 Mayumi: =american
33 Sunju: "American"
34 Aya: he does everything.
35 Keiko: he does everything.
36 so nanka I-I-I-I- feel very sorry a- disappointing
37 uh (.) about myself. [hehehehe
38 Sunju: [hehe
39 Keiko: I can’t uh nanka (like) take part in as a
40 housewife uh:
41 Masako: how how long you you have been married?
42 Keiko: uh (.) six months.
43 Masako: six months okay=
44 Sunju: =oh [okay
45 Mayumi: [okay okay [hehehehehehehehehehe
46 Sunju: [hehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehe ((con’t line 51))
47 Masako: just married=
48 Mayumi: =yeah yeah just married
49 Sunju: aha hehehehehehehehehehe
50 Aya: yeah that’s right
51 Mayumi: hehehehehehe
52 Keiko: just married is good part I hav nandakke newly newly
53 Sunju: ((whatchamacallit)) newly
54 newlywed yeah "I know"
55 Mayumi: >yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah<

This excerpt shows how certain complaints are treated as tellable while others are not. Keiko’s intent to join the group by complaining about her inability is not accepted by others. After a long pause in line 23, Keiko initiates her story and tells the other women that her husband does all the house work. Masako shows her surprise at Keiko’s unusually good husband in line 28 and Keiko apologizes for her inability to belong in a group in line 29. This excerpt shows the two factors, husband’s ethnicity and the length of marriage are the important elements to consider. In line 31 Sunju asks about the ethnicity of Keiko’s husband. Mayumi, based on her background knowledge, answers ‘American’. This reveals that the husband’s ethnicity is the key to explaining his unusual involvement in housework. Sunju offers the possibility that Keiko’s husband has non-Japanese ethnicity. In line 41, Masako changes the topic to the length
of the marriage. Considering that other participants in this study have been married for more than 10 years (see Table 1), Sunju and Mayumi claim their authority about knowing how longer-married husbands behave at home. After Keiko mentions that she has been married for 6 months, they laugh throughout the conversation without any further explanation.

In line 30, Keiko searches for a word to continue her story, but other members interrupt and check details about Keiko’s husband. Sunju asks about Keiko’s husband’s ethnicity, which is answered by Mayumi. Also, Aya in line 34 confirms that Keiko’s husband does all the house chores. Keiko confirms what Aya has said and continues her story. Keiko’s apologies are further deployed in lines 36 and 37 as forms of emotional self complaints. In lines 39 and 40, Keiko acknowledges her insufficiency as a participant, both in her home and in the story, as a ‘housewife’. In line 41, Masako asks about the length of Keiko’s marriage in search of a clue to explain Keiko’s unusually happy case. Keiko’s newlywed status is discovered, and it creates a social division between her and the other women. Keiko’s answer causes continuous laughter from Aya, Masako, Mayumi, and Sunju, but the source of laughter is not explicitly explained by anybody in this group.

In line 47, Masako confirms Keiko’s newlywed status and this is taken up by the others. Keiko evaluates her marriage in line 52. Keiko switches to a Japanese word nadakke meaning whatchamacallit as a form of searching for a word. Here the word ‘newlywed’ is a word they recently learned from class. Sunju and Mayumi show their understanding of the word they learned besides showing their agreement upon Keiko’s evaluation. Keiko tries to tell her story, but in this group of women who have established themselves as housewives who complain about their husbands, her story does not fit. Other members do not help her continue the story, focusing instead on Keiko’s newlywed situation.

Excerpt 3-b ‘you better wait one more year.’

56 Masako: so: you better wait one more year=
57 Sunju: =yeah↑
58 M, M, S, K, A: ((laughter))
59 Mayumi: ( ) change
60 Aya: yeah↑:
61 M, M, s, K, A: ((laughter))
62 Masako: now you have to enjoy=
63 Sunju: =‘yeah’
64 Masako: just (.) let him do=
65 Sunju: =‘yeah’
66 Masako: so he’ll do better (.5) ‘yeah’?
Keiko: sorry I nandakke ((whatchamacallit)) just only us
I have my husband only live together
and no mother in law haha no mo-uh father in law
((smiley voice))
["so far so good"
Mayumi: [yea:h I envy you
Keiko: "hmm"
Masako: don't †worry about that.
Keiko: hehehehehe
Masako: just enjoy tha†t much
I: have one question about Chinese culture, I have one
very shocking experience on funeral

As an expert who has been married for a lengthy period of time, Masako suggests in line 49, ‘you better wait one more year’. This advice is taken by Sunju in line 57 and other members laugh together in the following turn. In line 62, Masako shows her expertise and gives advice in an imperative form. Sunju agrees with Masako’s idea in lines 63 and 65. Also, Masako predicts the future behavior of Keiko’s husband with confidence. Masako’s advice refutes Keiko’s right to complain as a housewife. Keiko apologizes again for the fact that she does not live with her in-laws, who are frequent sources of complaints among the other women in the group (see Excerpt 2). In line 72, Keiko earns admiration from Mayumi but there is no chance for her to continue complaining. In line 74, Masako again reassures Keiko but Masako’s advice carries the implication that Keiko will eventually be qualified to join the group of expert housewives who can complain about their husbands. Finally, Masako in line 77 shifts the topic to Chinese culture, as she searches for a new and more general topic that would appeal to others in the group.

In this excerpt, it is interesting that Masako abruptly ends Keiko’s narrative by asking about Chinese funeral customs. Keiko’s narrative is contradicting the gendered perspectives that this community of practice has constructed in this intercultural space because her experiences as a housewife are very limited. Masako, as a more powerful community member, first offers her interpretation of the narrative and then shuts the topic down entirely. These findings are reminiscent of Menard-Warwick’s (2009) observation that claims of non-traditional gender identities are met with laughter or representation of their non-acceptance in ESL classroom discourse.

I highlight the multilayered roles of women’s apologies or complaints in this excerpt. The question that emerges is whether they are really apologizing or complaining. I suggest that the apology or complaint works as a bid
for attention and as a bid for sharing experiences, and this carries emotions among the women. In this vein, Keiko seems to be quite successful in using social strategies to place herself in the center of attention, control the topic, and remain ‘out’ as a newlywed housewife. Keiko expresses social dependence on the others by asking them for help and guidance. Expressing and experiencing emotions such as envy, jealousy, or empathy can be considered ways of establishing affiliation or disaffiliation among women. This excerpt draws our attention to the following questions: Who deserves to complain? Who can make a tellable complaint? The answer seems to lie in how the women allow or disallow various actions in their talk. Through ratifying certain contributions as valid complaints, they police the interactions by placing certain requirements for complaining, and they accept or reject the opportunity to take the floor of the story and to make their story tellable.

**FINDINGS**

Break time is an institutionally assigned time and space. The women in this study use this time and space for constructing belonging. They draw on different topics, build their affiliations based on shared experience and knowledge, and construct their own community of practice where they belong as daughters-in-law or housewives who can complain about their husbands. The women in this study actively participate in co-constructing stories so that they can occupy their tellership and achieve their interactional and social goals. Such aims include setting up an atmosphere of companionship, having an impact on people’s sense of identity, and building intimate relationships. The co-construction of the experience through joint storytelling not only provides the women with the opportunity for participating in their L2 but also provides them with a space for (inter)cultural belonging.

To capture the dynamic participation in storytelling, I considered three narrative dimensions: embeddedness, tellership, and tellability. I found that expressing complaints is a dominant feature of the women’s interaction. Their stories were culturally and socially embedded, and they used contextualized interactional resources to make a joke or to project future events. Tellership was a very prevalent aspect of women’s stories, for it showed storytellers’ floor-holding rights and sequential story management. Last, tellability is the participants’ orientation to what locally constitutes a tellable story. The members in a group must have access to the knowledge, and not all complaints and involvements are necessarily accepted. For example, Keiko’s newlywed categorization resulted in the lack of significance of her stories for the particular interlocutors in the group, thereby preventing her from constructing a tellable complaint. In the stories, gendered identities emerge and become a predominant topic in this group. As the first excerpt reveals, the universally gendered topic of pregnancy becomes local when the women utilize their local resources for constructing
their social bonds. Moreover, considering the larger social contexts, the specific gendered identities the women construct are relevant to their traditional (e.g. East Asian) family structures in a multi-ethnic context, as in Keiko’s case.

CONCLUSION

Stories are anchored in a specific context, which makes them relevant to the people within that context. I have investigated women’s stories that were told in particular interactional contexts. Break time at ESL classes offers space and time for the women to draw on stories of their pregnancies, mothers-in-law, and husbands. These can be very universal topics for complaints among women, but at the same time these are also locally shared resources for the women. The findings support the idea that gender is an ‘empirically-oriented area of inquiry’ (Cameron 2005: 485).

This study contributes to the body of knowledge in L2 studies and gender and places an emphasis on analyzing second language data in interactional narratives, utilizing the concepts of Community of Practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; Wenger et al. 2002) at the methodological level by way of narrative analysis, a more concrete, visible, and discursive method for analyzing participants’ daily interactions with other members in the well-established group. This study also illustrates how participants negotiate their social relations in a sophisticated way, and it challenges the dominant view of L2 users as deficient communicators (Wagner and Gardner 2004). I propose instead to understand L2 users’ participation as an interactional achievement. During break time, the women zoom in on their common concerns and complaints, using their stories to build a familiar, safe, and comfortable environment in which to practice their new lingua franca. Telling stories thus allows the women to create space in which to belong, and to construct and maintain their gendered identities and relations.

SUPPLEMENTARY DATA

Supplementary material is available at Applied Linguistics online.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the participants who generously shared their life stories for this study. I am also very grateful to the editors and anonymous reviewers who offered insightful and constructive suggestions for earlier versions of this manuscript. Any shortcomings are, needless to say, mine alone.

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