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# SITUATIONAL AND CONTEXTUAL FEATURES AFFECTING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CHOICE AND USE

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*Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to examine the linguistic patterns used by a group of English as a foreign language (EFL) speakers by focusing on the situational and contextual features and the way they affect language choice and use in their natural interactions. Language patterns used vary not only according to the social characteristics of the speaker, such as social class, ethnic group, age and sex, but also according to the social context in which the speaker finds himself. Trudgill (1983) notices that factors connected with the situation in which language is being used have a linguistic effect on the speaker because many aspects of social situation can contribute to deciding which linguistic variety is to be employed on a particular occasion (Trudgil 1983:106). The study found that linguistic patterns used by EFL speakers vary depending on the formality or informality of the situation on the one hand, and it is directly connected to the requirements of the given context on the other hand. Also, their sensitivity to contextual factors including characteristics of the person they are talking to are relevant factors in accounting for people's speech patterns.*

*Keywords: situation, contextual factors, EFL, linguistic patterns.*

Situational and contextual issues given by the immediate social situation like workplace, home, recreation, peer group, perceived formality of situation, constitute a category of society's features affecting language choice and use. Linguistic patterns vary not only according to the social characteristics of the speaker, such as his social class, ethnic group, age and sex, but also according to the social context in which the person finds at a given time. Drawing on Trudgill's (1983) sociolinguistic approach and Rogoff's (1994) sociocultural theory as presented by Norton and Toohey (2001) assume that "learners of English participate in particular, local contexts in which specific practices create possibilities for them to learn English" (Norton and Toohey 2001:311).

Based on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory human cognition is formed through social activity and learning a second or a foreign language is perceived as a semiotic process derivable by participation in social activities rather than internal cognitive processes undertaken by the individual (Block 2003, Lantolf 2000; Lantolf and Thorne 2006). The participants of this study were questioned about the effect of the context and situation on their speech patterns as they perceived them in their

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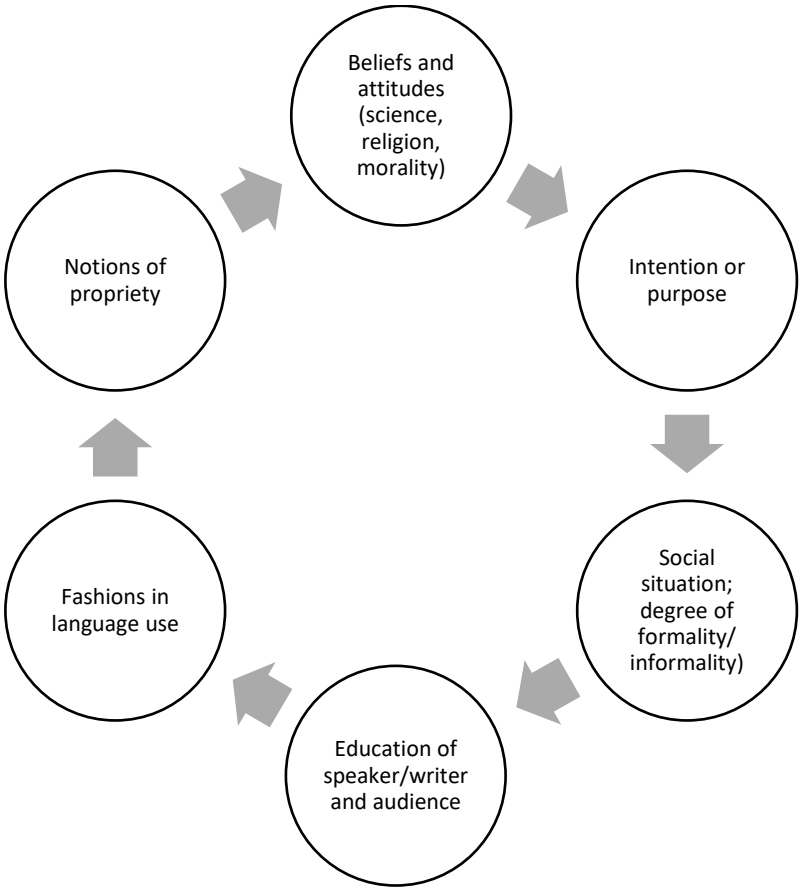



*Figure 1: Social context – factors which may influence use or response*

social life. The same speaker uses different linguistic varieties in different situations and for different purposes. The totality of linguistic varieties used in this way by a particular community of speakers is known as verbal repertoire according to Trudgill (1983). For example, if a speaker is talking to the people he works with about their work, his language is likely to be different from that he will use at home with his family. Linguistic varieties that are linked in this way to occupations, professions or topics are termed as registers. They are represented by a particular kind of language being produced by the social situation.

The words we use for concepts do help form and convey our ideologies, attitudes, and behaviours. "This doesn't mean, as Whorf thought, that we are prisoners of language. It does mean that language reflects cultural attitudes, and that we unconsciously adopt those attitudes as we learn the language" (Fromkin and Rodman 1998:352). P.L. Berger and T. Luckmann (1966) notice that "theoretical knowledge is only a small and by no means the most important part of what passed for knowledge in a society … the primary knowledge about the institutional order is knowledge … is the sum total of 'what everybody knows' about a social world, an assemblage of maxims, morals, proverbial nuggets of wisdom, values and beliefs, myths, and so forth" (65).

Thus, language performance and competence of EFL speakers are likely to be affected by any or all of aspects of social organization: gender, peer group, health or disability/body image, occupation (physical work, trades, law, politics, news media, journalism, etc.), social

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class, age, ethnic group (may be link to regional variation), etc. Broadly presentation of the levels of language analysis and assessing language fluency by linguistic competence and performance of the speaker have had the goal of bringing us to the core of using language in a complex society.

Trudgill (1983) notices that other factors connected with the situation in which language is being used, over and above occupation, have a linguistic effect. Language varies according to whether it is written or spoken. Written English is more formal than spoken English. Moreover, the kind of subject matter that is under discussion will have an effect, in addition of that of register, on the language produced. "Many aspects of social situation can contribute to deciding which linguistic variety is to be employed on a particular occasion, while the styles and registers which make up speakers' verbal repertoires are the particular versions of their dialects which they use in particular contexts for particular topics" (Trudgill 1983:106).

Besides regional and social dialects, speakers may use different styles or registers depending on the particular context, relating to others his experiences with regard to the immediate environment, physical or psychological. Slang is not often used in formal situations or writing, but is widely used in speech. Argot and jargon referring to the unique vocabulary used by professional or trade groups are encountered only in those specific groups. In different social contexts, an individual will speak in different ways. This is called stylistic variation. Moreover, speakers who differ from each other in terms of age, gender, social class, ethnic group, for example, will also differ from each other in their speech, even in the same context, called social variation.

The interaction among social categories unfolds in a great diversity of contexts and people use a range of resources carry on the social activities they are engaged in, including the construction of social identities and social relations. The role played by language in all these processes is a prominent one and it is completed by other objects from the surrounding environment, bodily gestures used in daily communication. The situational factors which affect language choice and use according to Ladegaard (2000) are:

(a) Actual or considered presence of peer group members. Members of the peer group may influence a speaker even when they are not present in the speech event.

(b) Normative prescriptions of proper behaviour. These are present in society at all levels, and may influence boys and girls differently.

(c) The availability of alternative behaviours. A speaker may be required by, for example, the school system, to use a standard form that s/he has a fairly negative attitude to.

(d) Expected and/or actual consequences of acts. How do others perceive the speaker if s/he uses the standard/vernacular? (adapted from Ladegaard 2000: 228).

This complexity of factors, given by the social roles that men and women play in daily life, their different values and social networks in which are employed, and their attitude regarding the contextual factors including characteristics of the person they are talking to are relevant factors in accounting for people's speech patterns.

## Case Study on a Group of Adult EFL Speakers

A questionnaire consisting of 21 items was applied to a number of 37 adult EFL respondents in order to find out in what measure situational and contextual features of society affect their language choice and use. The findings contribute to a certain degree to answer the research questions regarding the role played by the situational and contextual features on the linguistic patterns used.

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The quantitative questionnaire was chosen as one of the main sources of information for this study in order to get a larger sampling of the target group than would be possible by using only a few interviews. But the starting point of this research was my personal experience over a decade. In addition to the questionnaires employed as the main instrument, informal interviews and participant observation were used as complementary instruments. My observations were not always organized or methodical, but were mostly carried out spontaneously during my activity as an English teacher at *Matei Corvin* Technical College of Hunedoara, Secondary School of Șoimuș, and *Anghel Saligny* Technical College for Railway Transportation of Simeria. All the data gathered through the questionnaires were uploaded into Microsoft EXCEL spreadsheets upon return from the survey trips.

The reason for choosing the target group in this case study represented mainly by adults is the assumption that an adult person experienced and remarked more situations and accordingly more contexts during lifetime comparing with a young person and they are in a better condition to provide useful answers for the research topic. As illustrated by Figure 2 only one respondent of this questionnaire is under 18 age and the great majority of the participants are aged between 23 and 45 years.

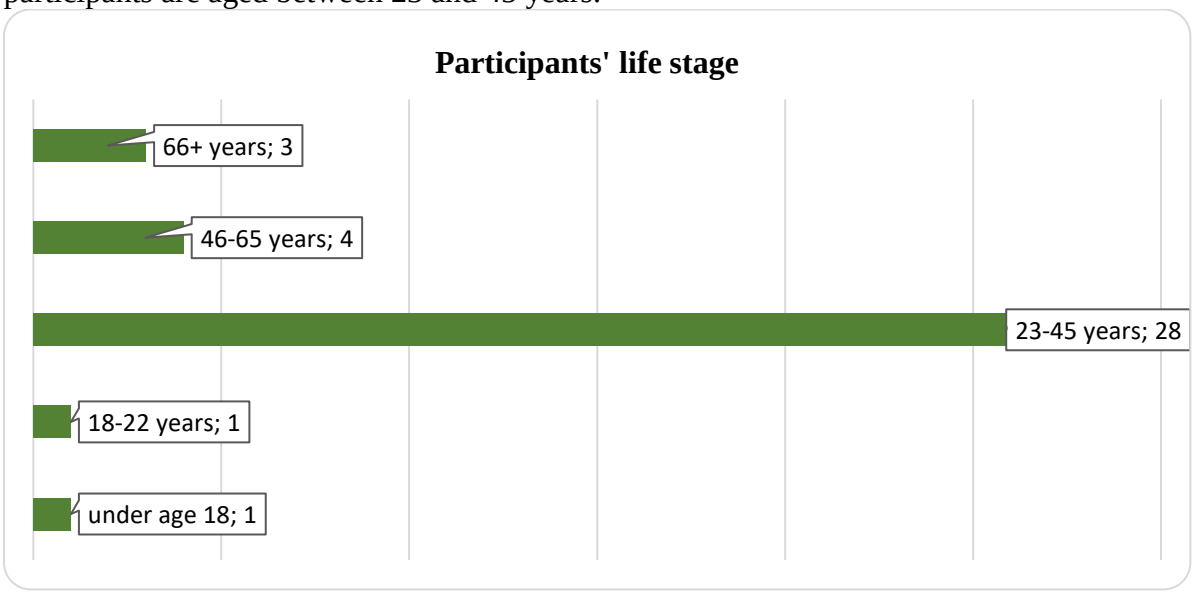



*Figure 2*

Seven of the informants are other nationalities than Romanian, as it is the case for the other 30 respondents. They are from countries like United States of America, Switzerland, France and Republic of Moldova. English is spoken by the whole group as a foreign language or lingua franca, followed by Romanian, French, German, Spanish and Russian. According to House (2003) in the European Union, as it is the case of this group of speakers, English represents the "default" language and it is considered an effective lingua franca, thus explaining the spread of English in UE.

First section of the questionnaire focuses on discovering the background information that might be affect the subjects' language such as parents' education and occupation, current residence, languages spoken and informants' occupations. Questions from this questionnaire are not intended and design to identify and measure the relation between respondents' occupations and language usage even if it can be an interesting issue for research.

Figure 3 summarizes the educational level of the informants and simultaneously a comparison with their parents' education as questions 6 and 9 evince. From the first glance it

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is visible that predominant level of questioned people's education is university degree, while high school is prevalent level of education for their fathers, and mothers' most frequent education level is secondary school. In the same time more mothers have university degree than fathers. This image provides us the advance and development of people's education from a generation to another. Post-university degree is encountered only in the informants case and it lacks form their parents.

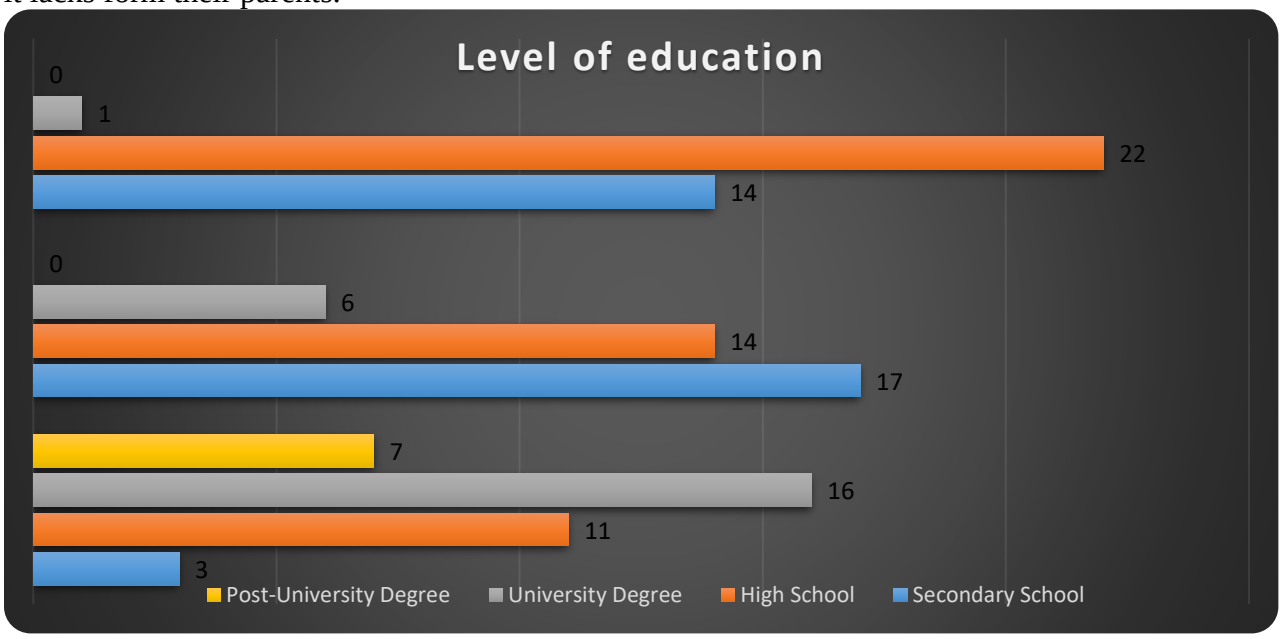



*Figure 3*

It was stated that immediate social situation of the speaker represented by home, workplace, peer group, perceived formality of situation constitute another category of society features affecting language use. Language varies not only according to the social characteristics of the speaker given by the background, but also according to the social context in which the speaker finds. According Trudgill's (1983) proposition the same speaker uses different linguistic varieties, named as verbal repertoire, in different situations and for different purposes. As mentioned before, I do not have a detailed research in this study of registers that are represented by the totality of linguistic varieties that are linked to occupations, professions or different topics, but only establish that there is a relationship between the mentioned aspects.

Trudgill's (1983) assertion that language varies according to whether it is written or spoken is confirmed by the answers ticked at question 14. Written English is proven to be more formal than spoken English is supported by the great number of respondents that agreed and strongly agreed that they use more complex and sophisticated words when they write a message than in speaking.

| *Options* Responses | *Strongly disagree* | *Disagree* | *Not sure* | *Neutral* | *Agree* | *Strongly agree* | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Nr. of responses | 1 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 16 | 13 | 37 |
| Percentage % | 2 | 5 | 10 | 2 | 43 | 38 | 100 |

*Table 4*

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It is concluded from discussions and observation that written form of communication is more rarely used than the spoken one, thus it is made with attention at almost every word. The writing needs more attention unlike the speaking which flows faster. When somebody writes something to anybody else, that person has in mind that the written message lacks a given context and the body language that conveys a great amount of the speaker's intention, therefore the chosen words have to convey the entire idea from the writer's mind. The written message has to convey including the possible questions that an interlocutor could ask if something is not clear. That is why there is an obvious difference between written or spoken communication.

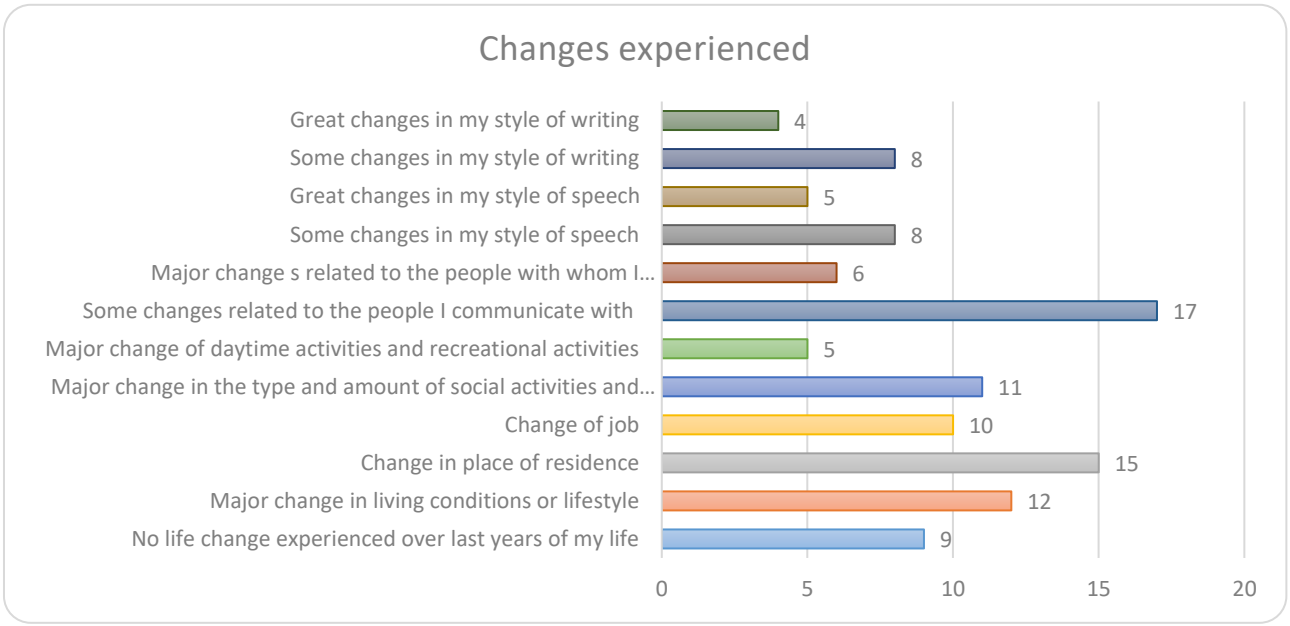



*Figure 5*

From the Figure 5, data provided by question 12, we can see that our informants are affected by some or major changes experienced by them or their families. Only 9 from the respondents ticked the option of *no life change experienced over last years of life.* The change most prevalent encountered in this survey is represented by *some changes related to the people I communicate with,* and it was experienced by 17 informants, and only 6 responses are those marked by *great changes related to the people I communicate with.* This option is followed in frequency by *changing in the place of residence* with 15 answers. There may be a natural effect of changing the place of residence to be some change related to the people whom respondents communicate with.

However, the figure below confirms the idea of stylistic variation, according to which, in different social contexts, an individual will speak in different ways. Moreover, speakers who differ from each other in terms of age, gender, social class, ethnic group, as proven by the first two questionnaires, will also differ from each other in their speech, even in the same context, so called social variation.

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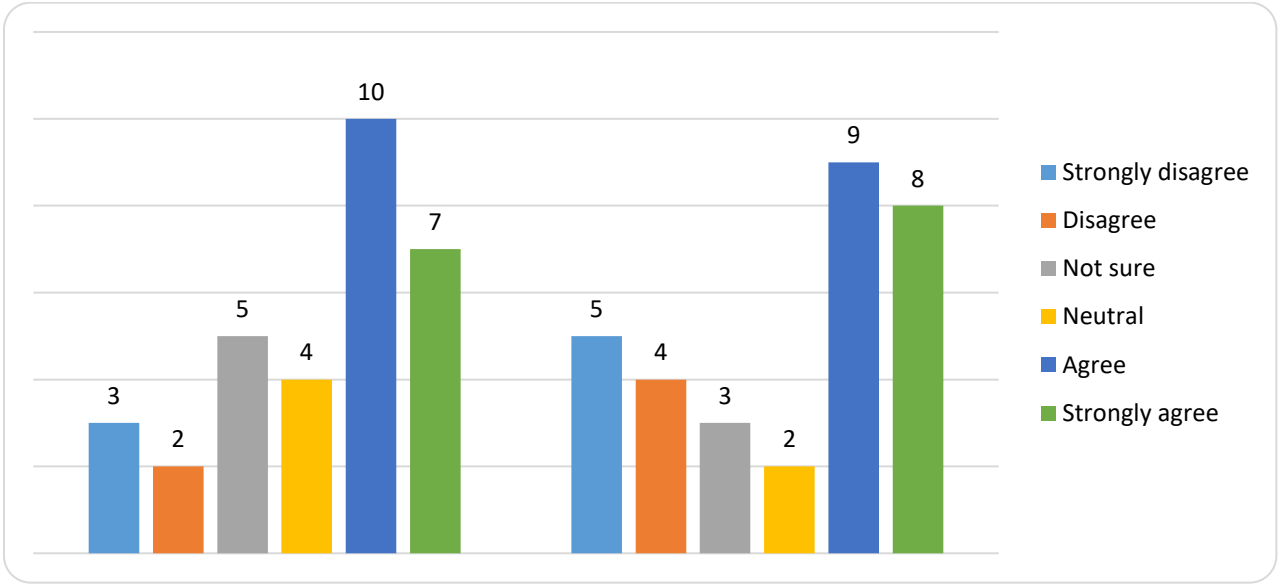



*Figure 6*

Let us consider two extremely different environmental situations: one from an information commissioner's office and the other one of a peasant household. Not only that the lexis used extremely differs in these two cases but the speech patterns and linguistic performance will be totally different from one case to another because there is a great difference of formality between the two situations. The language used is as diverse as it is the environment. Notwithstanding, if the same group of people, others than the officer's employees or the peasants, would find themselves in the both mentioned places, the linguistic differences may be small, but they are at all.

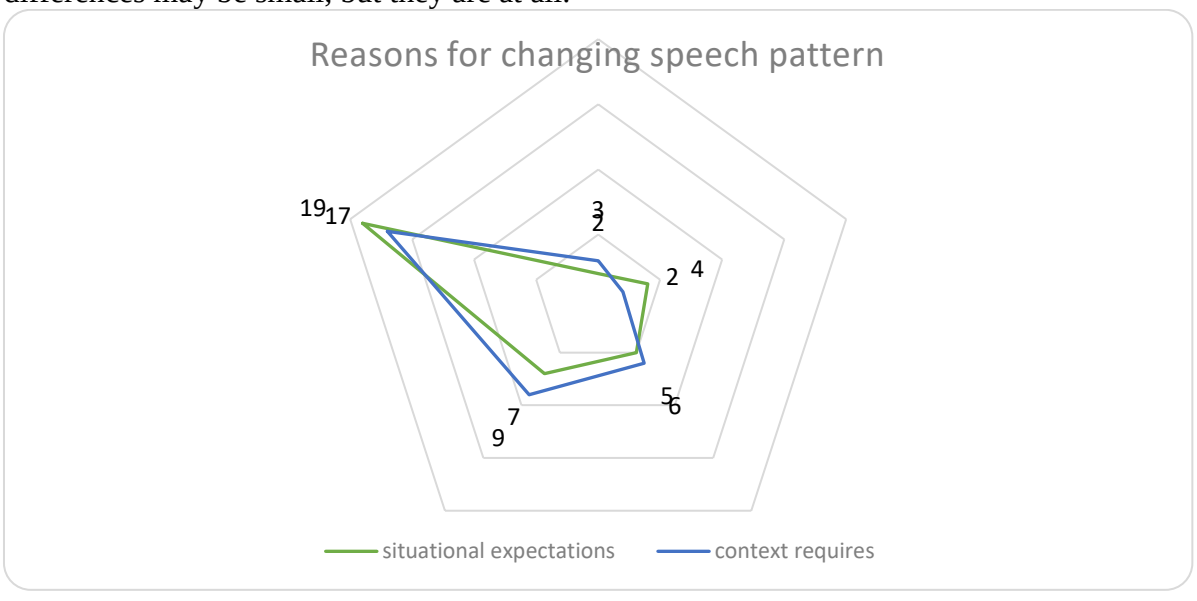



*Figure 7*

It is confirmed by Figure 7 representing answers given for question 21 the hypothesis that the social roles played in various contexts and social networks, and their attitude regarding contextual factors including characteristics of the person they are talking to are relevant factors in accounting for people's speech patterns. Among situational expectations of

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the group that our respondents interact with and context requirement of an adequate way of speech, the first one prevails according to the question 21 from this questionnaire as represented by the figure above.

| Answers / Options | Yes | | Maybe | | I do not know | | No | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Nr. of responses | Percent % | Nr. of responses | Percent % | Nr. of responses | Percent % | Nr. of responses | Percent % |
| In different situations | 29 | 78 | 5 | 13,5 | 1 | 3,5 | 2 | 5 |
| In different contexts | 30 | 81 | 4 | 11 | 3 | 8 | 0 | 0 |

*Figure 8*

When the informants had to answer question 20 if they see any difference in the style of speaking used by a particular group of people, they answered as follows in the table below. The great majority of the respondents (78%) identify different speaking styles used by the same group of people in different situations and only five percentage of the informants do not use and do not notice any difference in the speech patterns.

However, the idea of stylistic variation according which in different social contexts a person speaks in different ways is validated by the findings of this study. Moreover, speakers who differ from each other in terms of age, gender, social class, ethnic group, as proven by the first two questionnaires, will also differ from each other in their speech, even in the same context, so called social variation. It was proved that the different values and social networks the people have, who they talk to most, and also their sensitivity to contextual factors where the characteristics of the person they are talking to constitute relevant factors in accounting for people's speech patterns.

According to the results of this survey, the linguistic patterns used by this group of EFL speakers vary depending on the formality or informality of the situation, and it is alos directly connected to the requirements of the given context of the speaker.

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