Negotiating Meaning in the EFL Context

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ABSTRACT

Language learning is a very complex process. It usually takes place inside classrooms and learners might not have the opportunity to sufficiently practice it in real life contexts. Since the main purpose of language learning is communication, most language teachers and researchers have asserted that learners should engage in meaningful interaction and negotiation of meaning through communicative language tasks to improve their communicative competence (Branden, 2000; Morell, 2004; Yuan and Wang, 2006). This paper aims to thoroughly examine the concept of negotiation of meaning and to address its relationship to learners' communicative competence. It examines both theory and research and argues that negotiation of meaning is essential in foreign language classrooms as it provides learners with the opportunity to produce language in a non-threatening atmosphere (Yuan and Wang, 2006) and helps them generate comprehensible input and output (Pica, 1985, Pica *et al.*, 1989). Through negotiation of meaning, learners are pushed to produce language and to make their points clear to achieve comprehensibility. Thus, the paper lends support to the concept of negotiation of meaning and its use in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Language, acquisition, learning, communication, negotiation of meaning

INTRODUCTION

Human language is a very complex phenomenon, which has always boggled the minds of those who have sought to explain how it is acquired or learned. Although mind boggling, language can be defined, albeit not very expressively, as an automatic, unconscious interplay between content and form (symbols representing sounds and meaning standing for or reflecting cultural, social, perceptual, and cognitive knowledge), which is carried out with the purpose of sharing or negotiating meaning for the sake of communication. This communication is aimed at furthering understanding that will lead to the accomplishment of a certain task which, in turn, will contribute to the welfare of the individual or community.

The fact that language is an automatic, unconscious process means that it happens involuntarily, without conscious thought or consideration from the speakers. Automaticity is applicable to the process of language acquisition, as well as the process of its production after it is acquired. This statement has two important implications. The first is that human children will pick up the language spoken in the surroundings where they grow up without their conscious effort and without any attempt from those around them to teach them the language. This picked up or acquired language will be the mother tongue or native language of these children. The second implication is that when producing the language, people do it automatically without having to think about the words, or sounds or rules that will

make up the comprehensible message. In fact, if a native speaker is asked to analyze and explain the grammatical structure of his own speech and his choice of words, he may not be able to do that, unless he is a linguist or a language teacher by profession.

According to Chaika (1994), "Human language is multilayered. It is composed of a system of meaningless elements that combine by rules into meaningful structures. Sounds, meaningless in themselves form meaningful words or parts of words. These words combine by rules into sentences, and sentences combine into discourses, which include conversation, books, speeches, essays, and other connected sentences. Each level has its own elements and rules for use and each also relates to other levels, also by rule" (p. 7). Since there is no one element that carries full communicative meaning by itself, it follows then that "human language is not isomorphic with its message," which in turn means that "there is no necessary one-to-one correspondence between message and meaning at any level" (ibid, p. 7).

Being multilayered and lacking isomorphism make language potentially complex in terms of "message production and sociological significance" (ibid, p. 8). This complexity, however, is not without benefits; in fact, it is crucial to the creative act of meaning making through language. Each element composing language is meaningless, but can combine with other meaningless elements to produce meaningful messages, and different combinations can produce different messages which convey different meanings. This means that by making different combinations using different rules, humans can produce an infinite number of messages that carry new meanings and new thoughts. These thoughts and meanings can multiply when communicated and shared with other humans who understand them and add their own meaning to them, hence building the edifice of thought and ideas, which explains Chomsky's assertion that language is the tool of thought (Chomsky, 1993). In the words of Chaika (1994, p. 9), "Because elements of language, notably individual sounds, have no

meaning in and of themselves, they can be divorced from meaning. Thus, human language can multiply meanings far beyond those of other communication systems [e.g. animal language]. The essentially meaningless elements of sound and syntax can be combined by rules into a multitude of words, sentences, and discourses… humans can create new sentences, sentences that they have never heard before, sentences that can be understood by others who know the same language."

The built-in rules in all human languages are crucial to creating an infinite number of new words and sentences. These rules are the rules of grammar, structure form or word formation. The acquisition of these rules among native speakers is automatic. As Chaika (1994) puts it, "We certainly cannot articulate the complex sets of rules we use for pronunciation, for sentence construction, and for discourse production. Nor can we explain what we actually do when we understand another speaker. In fact, this knowledge lies below the level of conscious awareness. If it did not, if we were conscious of everything that goes into speaking, oral communication would be considerably slowed down" (p. 6).

The above applies only to the process of acquiring the native language or mother tongue, a process that is effortless, automatic, and natural. However, learning a foreign language is far from being effortless, automatic or natural. The learning process occurs in a context where the language is not spoken as a native language in the community, where exposure to the language is limited and where the methods of learning that language are not natural, but contrived in educational settings that aim to teach it. The foreign language is not the first language that the learner learns for s/he has already acquired his own native language with its sounds, words, and rules. Thus, s/he has a frame of reference occupied by certain sets of sounds and rules which could be quite different from those of the foreign language. The learner of the foreign language comes from a culture that could be different from the target language in terms of norms, values, traditions and experiences. Since

these all shape and determine meaning in the learners' world, any mismatch between them and those of the target language will result in some comprehension and communication difficulties.

How would a learner, then, reconcile the differences without having them overlap to cause negative transfer from the mother tongue to the newly learnt foreign language? If we acknowledge that the purpose of language learning is communication, how can teachers of foreign languages foster communicative competence among their learners? Is it through negotiating form (e.g. structure, grammar, word formation, etc.), or is it through negotiating the meaning of the message? Thus, the aim of this paper is to address these critical questions by focusing on the concept of negotiation of meaning and its relationship with communicative competence and communicative language teaching in the foreign language classroom.

THE CONCEPT OF NEGOTIATION OF MEANING

The phrase 'negotiation of meaning' has been a subject of much research and discussions among second language researchers and practitioners (Branden, 2000). This phrase was first used in the field of first language acquisition research. Its use then evolved in second language acquisition contexts due to the different developments in the field. The recognition of the active and essential role of interaction in the acquisition of a second or foreign language (Morell, 2004), the role of comprehensible input and output, the effect of conversational modifications or modified interactions and the call for more communicative language approaches are major causes that have led to the emphasis placed on negotiation of meaning. The prevailing hypothesis in current theory is that the more learners struggle to get their messages through or across to their interlocutors, the greater the amount of interaction and therefore the greater the acquisition.

The phrase negotiation of meaning, as Pica (1994) defines it, "focuses on the comprehensibility of the message's meaning

and on the message's form in so far as that can contribute to its comprehensibility" (p. 518). Thus, negotiation is linked to both the lexical as well as the structural aspects of language. Negotiation is first triggered by lexical difficulties (Ellis, Tanaka and Yamazaki, 1994) that cause breakdowns in communication and non-comprehension. Therefore, attention should be devoted first to difficulties impeding comprehension. Attention to and analysis of form can come later. Stressing its interactive nature, Morell (2004, p. 329) defines negotiation of meaning as " an aspect of interaction that occurs when at least two interlocutors work together to arrive at mutual comprehension of their utterances. It is characterized by modifications and restructuring of interactions when instructors and their students anticipate or perceive difficulty in understanding each other's messages."

Negotiation takes place in communicative and interactional contexts between learners of a foreign language or between native speakers and learners. The differences between the interactions of non-native and native speakers (NNSs/NSs) and those of native speakers and other natives have been the subject of a lot of research. The investigation of the effect of negotiation on acquisition and whether a direct relationship can be traced between negotiation and comprehension on the one hand and negotiation and acquisition on the other is still debated and is still far from being settled (Perllowe, 2000). Meanwhile, variables affecting negotiation, such as learner factors, modes of communication, type of interaction (whether it is in groups, pairs or the classroom), and types of tasks have also been researched by many studies documented in the literature. Research studies on learner variables are reviewed and reported on in the upcoming sections of this paper. The following section reports on three main hypotheses, namely Krashen's input hypothesis, Swain's output hypothesis, and Long's interactional hypothesis, the explanation of which is essential to establish a theoretical framework for the concept of negotiation of meaning.

THE INPUT HYPOTHESIS

Krashen's input hypothesis (1980, 1983 and 1985) is one of the most influential hypotheses in second language acquisition. This hypothesis states that in order for language acquisition to occur, learners need to be provided with comprehensible input that is one stage beyond their current level of language proficiency (i+1). In order to understand that input, the learners have to struggle to meet that challenge (McGuire, 1992).

Pica (1994) also asserts that input of three types is essential for SLA to take place. The first type is positive input, which she describes as grammatically and syntactically accurate language. Such input must be available to serve the learning process for it resembles data that learners draw on for their learning. Meanwhile, enhanced input is the second type of input necessary for language acquisition. Enhanced input helps learners identify which forms can and which cannot occur in the target language. The last type, which Pica calls negative input and feedback, provides the learners with metalinguistic information on the clarity, accuracy and comprehensibility of the utterances they produce. It is during the negotiation of meaning that all these types of input can be generated.

While Gass (1989) contends that input of some sort is necessary for language acquisition to take place, she expresses some concerns regarding the sort of input necessary saying that this is not yet clear until now. Kagan (1995) characterizes input that fosters language acquisition as comprehensible, developmentally appropriate, redundant, and accurate. However, Kagan admits that input alone is not sufficient for language acquisition to take place. Therefore, he adds output and context variables that interact to determine acquisition. In this way, Kagan agrees with Swain's (1985) hypothesis about comprehensible output.

SWAIN'S OUTPUT HYPOTHESIS

Since receiving input may not involve any type of interaction among learners, Swain has advocated that though input is essential to language learning, it is not sufficient. Language production, or as she calls it comprehensible output, is another necessity for successful acquisition to occur. She gained this insight through her experience with Canadian immersion students whose oral production lagged behind their listening skills due to the fact that they were never pushed to produce language comprehensible to others.

In her hypothesis, Swain claims that the role of comprehensible input is to "provide the learner with opportunities for contextualized, meaningful use to test out hypotheses about the target language and to move the learners from a purely semantic analysis of the language to a syntactic analysis of it (Swain, 1985, p. 252). Thus, when learners are pushed to produce language, they struggle to make themselves understood by others. In the process, learners come to realize the gap in their interlanguage, or between what they want to say and what they really say. To make themselves clear, the learners move from a semantic focus, where the meaning is the target, to a syntactic analysis of the language, where form comes into consciousness. The grammatical analysis in which the learner engages is vital in language development as it helps learners move from being recipients of input to being active participants who can process the input, turn it into intake and attempt to produce it themselves (Shahadeh, 1999).

Other researchers came after Swain and added several other characteristics of comprehensible output. For example, Kagan (1995) describes such output as functional, communicative, frequent, redundant, and consistent with the identity of the speaker. Comprehensible output could be produced under a variety of conditions such as in interactions and negotiations between natives and non-natives or among non-natives themselves (Shahadeh,

1999), or between a teacher and her students. The output could be modified, premodified or unmodified. Types of tasks and arrangements (e.g. group work, pair work, or individual production) all affect the type of output and input generated. An extended discussion of factors affecting negotiation and output production will be provided later in the paper.

LONG'S INTERACTIONAL HYPOTHESIS

Until the late 1970s, the role of interaction in language acquisition was taken for granted until Hatch (1978, cited in Shahadeh, 1999) brought it to the attention of teachers and educators. Among the researchers and theorists who followed the path that Hatch had sparked interest in is Long, who devised the interaction hypothesis. During the 1980s, Long started investigating the interactions of NNSs and NSs and saw that speakers modify their output using certain strategies in order to make it comprehensible to their interlocutors. He first called these modifications interactional modifications, but later referred to them as "negotiation." Of course the modified output of one speaker becomes the input of another (ibid).

Long (1980) focused on modified input and distinguished it from modified interaction. In his view, modified input is foreigner talk directed to the learner while modified interaction is related to the structure of the conversation. Topic shifts, comprehension checks and clarification requests are conversational modifications that permeate the interactions of NNSs more often than NSs interactions. Such strategies help speakers to achieve comprehensibility, avoid breakdown in communication and repair the discourse when trouble occurs, in order to ensure continuity of the conversation. Long deduced from the above that conversational adjustments promote acquisition since they ensure better comprehension.

Many studies have found that learners benefit most from interactionally modified input. Loschky (1994) conducted a study that aimed to test aspects of Krashen's input

hypothesis and Long's interactional hypothesis and the possibility that these could facilitate language acquisition. Learners of Japanese were the subjects. They were divided into three groups that received three different treatments, namely unmodified input with no interaction, premodified input with no interaction and interactionally modified input (input modified during interaction). The last group achieved the most in terms of moment-to-moment comprehension, but retention was not affected by the difference in treatment. Long holds that input will not be turned into intake unless the learner is developmentally ready to attend to the structures present in the input (Long, 1983b) and that could explain the reason that no differences between groups were found with regard to retention. Here, learner factors come into play in the process of negotiating meaning.

Gass and Veronis (1985) hold that a great deal is now known about interactions between NNSs and NSs or among NNSs themselves, but little is known about the lasting effect of these interactions on the learners' language development. Longitudinal studies are needed to prove the effect of interaction and negotiation of meaning that take place in conversational interactions.

Loschky (1994) cites Parker and Chaudron (1987), who reviewed 12 studies that compared NNSs' comprehension of unmodified and premodified input for both reading and reading skills. The findings of these studies indicate that premodified input increased NNSs' comprehension. However, Loschky does not say under what conditions the findings were true, something that is deemed essential if the results are to be taken seriously.

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Negotiation of meaning occurs in conversational interactions, which are communicative in nature as speakers and interlocutors try to arrive at a mutual understanding of the messages exchanged by both parties in a social context or

semi-social or simulated social contexts. Many theorists view negotiation as the context for interaction, an activity that has the potential to develop not only social skills but also cognitive and linguistic skills.

Larsen-Freeman (1986) defines communicative competence, as:

"Being able to use the language appropriate to a given social context. To do this, students need knowledge of the linguistic forms, meanings and functions. They need to know that many different forms can be used to perform a function and also that a single form can often serve a variety of functions. They must be able to choose from among these the most appropriate form, given the social context and the roles of the interlocutors. They must also be able to manage the process of negotiating meaning with their interlocutors" (p.131).

Thus, negotiation of meaning is an essential part of the communicative competence of a language learner. Ensuring the continuity of a conversation and the comprehensibility of the conveyed massage take more than a mere knowledge of form and structures: it takes the ability to use strategic competence to avoid breakdowns in communication and repair incomprehensibility when it occurs. Knowledge of style and register, as well as the roles of people involves sociolinguistic knowledge which Canale and Swain term sociolinguistic competence. McGuire (1992) says "communicative competence encompass within it not only the knowledge of structure and vocabulary, but also the ability to negotiate meaning through interaction in a variety of situations which are authentic and realistic" (p.4).

Communicative language teaching perceives language as interaction, as an interpersonal activity that has a clear relationship with the society. Therefore, language use, linguistic, social and situational contexts are to be considered in the language classroom (Burns, 1984; cited in Galloway, 1993). To increase interaction and language use inside the

classroom, students are encouraged to speak more, and teacher talk is minimized because the teacher's role is that of a facilitator rather than as a controller or dictator. In order to maximize the time allotted to every student and to increase the opportunities students have to practice the language structures they have been taught and to negotiate meaning, the teacher can use group and pair work, which has long been an integral part of the communicative language classroom (McGuire, 1992). When working in pairs or small groups, learners experience an increased responsibility to participate, and in participating they gain confidence in using the target language in general and they become responsible managers of their own learning (Galloway, 1994).

Recent research has not been consistent with regard to the benefits of group work despite the wealth of theoretical literature supporting and advocating small group work in the classroom. Dyads and groups that work really cooperatively were found to produce more language in speaking and writing (Hery, 2001). To illustrate that clearly, students were found to talk more when put into groups than when just interacting with the teacher. Their language production in groups was not found to be less accurate or careless than when they spoke to the teacher. In addition, students tended to engage in more speech acts in groups than when individually speaking to the teacher. Empirical evidence also shows that group work provides an atmosphere conducive to learning, and encourages the production of comprehensible input and output through the process of negotiating (McGuire, 1992). When negotiating in groups, students develop problem solving techniques that help them overcome the breakdowns in communication that render their messages incomprehensible. Problem solving techniques, in turn, facilitate fluency of language use, which is a major concern in communicative language teaching (Brumfit, 1980; cited in Aston1986).

Cooperation among students working together in a group is a factor that was found to differentiate the language production of cooperative groups from independent ones

(groups that do not really work collaboratively). In his study, McGuire (1992) found that groups which worked cooperatively tended to write longer skits. Cooperative groups, in comparison with independent groups, were found to do more turn taking for the characters in the skits, and the number of interactions was more for the cooperative groups. McGuire (1992) cites Hirose and Kobayashi (1991) who found similar results for group work. They observed that discussion groups incorporating cooperative learning principles could provide more opportunities for the generation of comprehensible input inside the classroom, especially for those who find it difficult to improve their oral skills by practicing outside the classroom.

When comparing the interaction between NNSs in groups and whole-class activities in the classroom, Rulon and MucCreary (1986, cited in Pica, 1994) found that NNSs produced sentences that were at the same level of syntactic difficulty in both contexts. Meanwhile, confirmation checks were more frequent in groups. The conclusion the researchers drew was that group interactions are at least as good as whole-class interactions held in the classroom.

However, contradicting results were found by Doughty and Pica (1986) who concluded that group work might be inappropriate for eliciting modified interaction due to many reasons, among which they mentioned the way the task is structured, students going along with the majority of the group or class, and the dominance of the more proficient students in the discussion. Foster (1998) found no significant difference between working in small groups and working in dyads. Many students in the groups did not participate at all; many more did not initiate any negotiated interaction in either dyads or small groups. Few produced modified utterances and generally, a small number of students were dominating the group's oral production and interaction. When evaluating the results of these studies, one should consider students' level of language proficiency, the types of tasks, communicative or otherwise, in which the students participate, familiarity with the topics discussed, and other factors related to the context and atmosphere of the classroom or the place where the group work is done. For example, communicative tasks like information gaps will push students to produce language and to participate orally in the group interaction.

To conclude this section, oral interaction between students can serve some important functions, such as providing opportunities for generating input, producing output and getting positive or negative feedback. Bygates (1988) holds that student-student oral interaction may help language development in two ways:

1. It gives the learners the opportunity to integrate grammar into their oral skill due to the flexibility it offers in choosing the most efficient syntactic units for communication.

2. Group interaction can initiate and activate discussion allowing communication to take place.

NSs/NNs INTERACTIONS VS. NNSs/ NNSs INTERACTIONS

The linguistic environment in which L2 learners are immersed has been viewed as one possible source of difference between first language (L1) and L2 acquisition. Native speakers of a certain language were found to simplify their language, often switching to an ungrammatical variety of it when speaking to non-native speakers or learners of that language. Such speech came to be known as foreigner talk. Omissions, expansions, and replacement or rearrangements are characteristics of the ungrammatical foreigner talk addressed to non-natives. Grammatically accurate foreign talk is often reduced to shorter utterances as measured by T-units. When it comes to vocabulary, NSs restrict themselves to using high frequency lexical items. In other words, they tend to restrict the range of the vocabulary they use when interacting with NNSs (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1990).

When NSs do not understand the message conveyed by NNSs during interaction, they signal that to the speakers. In response to that, the learners were found to segment problematic structures or words and modify them towards

comprehensibility. Modifications made by learners depend greatly on the type of signals used by NSs (Pica, 1994). In cases where the signal for non-understanding appears in the form of repetition, for example, learners may respond with a "Yes" answer without going into details.

When NNSs interact with other NNSs, they were found to engage in more negotiation of meaning, especially if the learners had different language backgrounds, where phonology and the difference in sound systems interfere or come into play (Shahadeh, 1999). Veronis and Gass (1985) affirm that interactions between NNSs and their counterparts not only maximize negotiation, but also provide an unthreatening forum. They found a higher frequency of non-understanding routines to be present in such interactions. To tackle incomprehensibility, learners engage in trouble-shooting procedures to render their messages comprehensible to the interlocutors (Long, 1983a: 1983b, cited in Aston, 1986). The huge amount of negotiation of meaning, elicited by these interactions in part happens due to the positive atmosphere that prevails in the context. Veronis and Gass (1985) refer to this context as the "unthreatening forum". Shahadeh (1999) explains this more clearly by saying that learners do not lose face when interacting with each other in the same way as they do when interacting with NSs. Knowing that all the participants in the negotiation of meaning are in the process of learning the language and that each has some imperfections in their language, or rather interlanguage, is likely to give the learners the peace of mind as well as the confidence to speak up and participate. Anxiety is reduced to a minimum, so students are more receptive to the language input emerging in the negotiation.

One major concern here is the accuracy of the input provided by learners to each other. Will the learners be acquiring each other's interlanguage? Probably, and hopefully, not. It was found that when learners engage in negotiation of meaning, and are confronted by incomprehensibility of their input, they tend to modify it in the direction of the target language, making it more plausible and better understood (Gass and Veronis, 1989, Foster and Ohta, 2005).

Similar findings to those obtained by Gass and Veronis were also found by Kashimaro (1992, cited in Shehadeh, 1999). His study had two main aims. First, it aimed at finding out whether non-native speakers could push the output of each other to be more grammatical and more target-like. Second, the study aimed to investigate the effect of task type on the frequency of incomprehension signals in each task. Two tasks were chosen, an information gap in the form of a jigsaw, and an open-ended discussion. The findings indicated that the utterances of the learners were more target-like during the open-ended discussion. For this reason, fewer incomprehension signals were found during open-ended discussions. To explain the findings one could surmise that in the open-ended discussion there is flexibility as to what students choose to talk about and what they choose to avoid (if they intend to play safe). The information gap task generated the greatest amount of negotiation, as measured by the number of incomprehension signals that occurred during the interaction. This is in line with the common consensus that communicative tasks, such as information gap activities which require the participation of all the learners in order to accomplish the task successfully, are the best in terms of their potential input, output and interaction.

However, one problem with the aforementioned study is that it failed to illustrate the total amount of interaction produced in every task and whether the differences in the amount of interaction were significant or not. Nevertheless, the study demonstrates that task type is one of the factors that can affect the process of negotiating meaning. Pica and Doughty (1985) found greater turn-taking and more output production done in NNSs/NNSs interaction than in NSs/NNSs' interactions.

A second concern that comes to mind regarding NNSs/NNSs' interactions is the possibility that the interaction is dominated by proficient students to the neglect of or the lack of involvement by less proficient ones. This situation could happen and in fact was documented in some studies, like that of Pica and Doughty (1985). A counter argument to

this could be that lack of participation is not an indicator of not learning. Some students learn better by listening to others. Recent research show that introverts are better learners of languages than extroverts because they take their time to internalize language before hurrying themselves to produce it. Learner factors such as personality and learning styles are factors that need to be kept in mind when examining language acquisition in general and negotiation of meaning in particular.

Shahadeh (1999) conducted a study involving learners of English coming from different language backgrounds. The study examined the ability of these NNSs to modify their interlanguage utterances towards comprehensibility in response to self-initiated and other initiated NNSs/NNSs and NS/NNSs interactions. Two communicative tasks were used, namely picture dictation and opinion-exchange. The researcher hypothesized that:

1. NNSs/NNSs interaction would provide additional chances for other-initiated clarification requests and self-initiated clarification attempts to produce more comprehensible output than NSs/NNSs interactions.

2. More modified comprehensible output would be produced in NNSs/NNSs interactions.

3. Picture dictation tasks would generate more chances for self-initiation and other-initiation and more modified output would be produced during this task.

The findings indicated that with regard to the first hypothesis, NNS partners did provide greater chances for other-initiated clarification requests than NSs partners; however, the differences were not significant. This finding provides only partial support for what is hypothesized about NNSs/NNSs interaction and its potential to generate more chances of interaction and negotiation of meaning than NSs/NNSs interactions. The occurrence of self-initiated clarifications was almost evenly distributed between the two types of interactions. Extended negotiation routines were significantly greater in NNSs/NNSs interactions than in NS/NNSs interaction when attempting to produce comprehensible output. This finding might seem to contradict the finding mentioned above which stated that NNSs/NNSs interactions were not found to differ significantly with regard to other initiated clarification requests from NSs/NNSs' interactions. However, the focus of the first finding, as it appears, was on other initiated clarification requests while the later mentioned finding focused on the attempts to produce comprehensible input. The researcher was not very clear in distinguishing between the findings and what each meant.

Hypothesis (3) was confirmed because the findings showed that the picture dictation task offered a significantly higher occurrence of other initiated clarification requests than the opinion exchange tasks.

NEGOTIATION OF MEANING, COMPREHENSION AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Comprehension has been viewed as the access gate to second or foreign language acquisition. Without it, it is difficult to imagine acquisition taking place. Therefore, a positive relationship has always been inferred between acquisition and comprehension. Studies on different input types, including foreigner talk, teacher talk, and negotiated interaction and premodified input, actually provide some kind of evidence for the importance of comprehension in language acquisition. In addition, evidence also could be derived from studies on the hearing children of deaf parents. The input for these children comes from TV mainly, which was found insufficient for successful acquisition to occur due to the fact this kind of input is incomprehensible in many ways and unmodified to suit the developmental level of the hearing child. For example, Dutch children who learned German only through TV were found to have difficulty acquiring German (Loschky, 1994). Thus, it appears that interactions in natural communicative settings,

or at least simulated settings, are of vital importance to the acquisition process. Social interaction, in the Vygotiskian theory, is the basis of language learning. The role of the expert, whether it be a teacher, an older person such as a parent or a peer who possesses a better command of the language, in modelling behaviour and in scaffolding it is a key factor in comprehension and hence acquisition. Since negotiation of meaning happens in social, natural or semi-natural communicative settings, it involves the interaction of two or more people who aim to establish mutual understanding of a certain topic. Such characteristics are typical of social settings conducive to language learning.

In her review of research done in the area of negotiation and social settings, Pica (1994) states that research " illustrate[s] ways in which negotiation contributes to conditions, processes and outcomes of L2 learning by facilitating learners' comprehension and structural segmentation of L2 input, access to lexical form and meaning and production of modified output" (p.493). Thus, during negotiation, learners generate input or modified input provided by their interlocutors. The modification helps learners comprehend the meaning of the input produced during the process.

Despite the entire sound theoretical basis for the inferred positive relationship between negotiation and comprehension, no direct relationship has been traced until now. In other words, learners' and interlocutors' negotiation does not always lead to immediate comprehension. Due to this fact, learner variables and other variables involved in the context of interaction have to be put into perspective. Comprehension could occur after the negotiation, because some learners hold some unresolved issues in the back of their minds for further consideration and analysis. In other words, what works for one learner may not work for another and what works in one setting or one context may not be successful in another. This is a problem that prevails in the field of teaching, be it language teaching or just teaching in general. There is no one way that works for all.

Some studies were able to trace relationship types between negotiation and comprehension in the cases of moment-to-moment comprehension. Retention of the materials comprehended during negotiation, however, was found not to be affected by the amount of negotiation done. Ellis, Tanaka and Yamasaki (1994) reported two classroom studies that investigated the effects of modified interaction on comprehension and vocabulary acquisition among 79 and 127 high school students of English in Japan. The results indicated that interactionally modified input resulted in better comprehension than premodified input with no interaction and that interactionally modified input led to more words being acquired than premodified input. However, learners who actively participated in negotiating meaning did not understand any better than those who were simply exposed to modified interaction. Active participants did not learn more new words. In response to that, we would suggest a line of longitudinal studies that take into consideration all the variables that could interfere in the negotiation process. Such studies are rare right now (Bitchener, 2004), but they are greatly needed in the field.

One example of these studies is the one conducted by Bitchener (2004) who investigated the retention of linguistic knowledge gained through negotiation among ESL learners over a period of 12 weeks. Retention was measured after one week and 12 weeks of interaction. In both conditions, the study found a high retention rate. Another major finding was that vocabulary was negotiated more than pronounciation and grammar. It is important to note here that research on negotiating meaning is still gaining momentum with researchers such as Pauline Foster and Amy Synder Ohta continuing interest in the area and connecting it to "sociocultural and cognitive approaches to second language acquisition" (Foster and Ohta, 2005, p. 402).

FACTORS AFFECTING NEGOTIATION

This section touches on what has been mentioned about variables affecting interaction and negotiation of meaning. The purpose of

including it here is to summarize the most important factors and to present them together rather than leaving them scattered throughout the paper. Among the variables that affect negotiation and the outcomes obtained from it are:

A. Learner variables: These are many and could be related to the age, personality type, gender, learning styles, and level of language proficiency of the learner. Pica (1994) states that if a learner is not yet ready for a new word, then he cannot acquire it, so negotiation can do little towards its internalization. Some learners are extroverts and out-going, so they like to participate and they learn through that; others are introverts and prefer to listen and internalize the language. Some female students may feel comfortable being put into groups with males, so they participate. However, in many Muslim and Middle Eastern cultures, many females do not feel comfortable working with males in the same group. For example, a study conducted in Indonesia by Hery (2001) found that dyads of the same gender produced more negotiation of meaning when working with information gap and jigsaw tasks. There are different learner types; visual students, kinaesthetic students, auditory students, and tactile students. Each learns in his own way, and if we are to do justice to negotiation and its effect, such factors should be considered and accounted for.

B. Type of tasks: The type of tasks used to generate input, output, and modified interaction has a potential effect on the amount of negotiation going on (Cheon, 2003; Hery, 2001; Pica *et al.*, 1989). Tasks are usually classified into:

1. Information gap tasks or one-way tasks. The success of this type of task is largely dependent on the ability of the participants to supply information to each other. To state that in other words, each student has a piece of information which the other participants do not have and has to share it with them in order to successfully complete the task. Such tasks are communicative tasks that require the participation of all the students in a certain group or pair. Jigsaw and picture dictations are examples of these tasks.

2. Two-way tasks are tasks in which the supply of information for the successful completion of the task is optional. A good example of such tasks is opinion exchange. Shahadeh (1999) found that picture dictation generated more clarification requests than opinion exchange tasks, which supports the idea that more communicative tasks generate or provide more opportunities for negotiation. Exceptions sometimes arise; however. Foster (1994) found that the grammar task, in which three dyads participated and which was expected to be unpromising in terms of negotiation since it did not require the exchange of information, produced low comprehension units for two dyads, but very many units for another dyad. This takes us back to what was said before about the fact that there is no one accurate way that could work for all with the same degree or potential for success.

C. Interaction in groups, pairs, and dyads: Small group interaction received a lot of support in the context of L2 teaching and learning. While interaction in groups was expected to generate a great amount of language production, some students were found to remain silent during group work when more proficient students dominated the discussions. Foster (1994) found that working in dyads engaged students in much negotiation of meaning when working on the information gap task. As for groups,

however, little negotiation was observed due to the dominance of one student or two in the group.

To conclude this section, the factors affecting language acquisition in general are those that affect negotiation of meaning as well. In addition to the factors mentioned above, setting, topic, mode of interaction, whether oral or written, the intention of the speakers, the style or register they use are all factors that can interfere and affect the process of negotiation of meaning and hence language acquisition (Maley, 1982).

THE ADVANTAGES OF NEGOTIATION OF MEANING

Here is a list of some of the benefits that students may gain from negotiation. It can:

1. Generate comprehensible input and output (Yuan and Wang, 2006).

2. Develop strategic competence through trouble-shooting strategies that help the learner repair misunderstanding and a avoid breakdown in communication.

3. Develop sociolinguistic competence and social skills as learners try to find a place in the group and attempt to convey their ideas according to the roles they play in the group and in consideration to the roles played by other group members.

4. Generate feedback, negative, signalling non-understanding, or positive confirming understanding and thus providing positive reinforcement.

5. Develop cooperative learning habits, which were found to be better facilitators of language acquisition than competitive learning habits (Yuan and Wang, 2006).

6. Reduce levels of anxiety in students and provide a positive atmosphere for learning.

7. Teach students to work with others in order to achieve mutual comprehension.

ARGUMENT AGAINST NEGOTIATION OF MEANING

There are two most common arguments against negotiation of meaning, as follows:

1. Students may learn from each other's interlanguage. We refuted that by saying that there are studies that showed that learners recognize the mistakes of each other, and when they attempt to modify their language, their modifications are directed towards more comprehensibility and more target-like forms.

2. Fillmore (1979, cited in Pica, 1994) suggests that social integration which the group achieved through a series of social strategies in N/NN interactions is the key to successful acquisition. Fillmore also suggests the following strategies for social integration in native conversations such as joining a group and acting as if the student understood what was going on, and counting on the assistance of group members. In our opinion, this goes against Swain's output hypothesis, which encourages students to produce language so that their oral language development will not lag behind their listening skills. Swain (1985) builds her hypothesis from the results she obtained from Canadian immersion programme where students were bombarded with input, but were not really successful in language acquisition due to the fact that they were not pushed to produce provide counter evidence against Fillmore's suggestion. Language acquisition requires comprehension as well as active participation if learners are to speak the language in a comprehensible way one day.

CONCLUSIONS

Negotiation of meaning has been present in the field of language acquisition for over 20 years now (Bitchener, 2004). Presumably, its presence is going to continue due to the fact that negotiation is based on sound theoretical principles and the

value of many of its aspects has been proven by research. Negotiation of meaning is an interpersonal skill that emerges in conversational and communicative contexts that are natural or simulated. It helps learners to generate input, output, and feedback that inform them of their success in transmitting messages they intend to transmit, and it encourages them to employ strategies that help them to get their messages across when breakdowns in communication occur. Although no direct relationship has yet been established between negotiation and comprehension, future longitudinal studies may produce promising results.

Negotiation is a beneficial problem-solving strategy that teaches social skills, and helps students to learn from each other. Different factors come into play when reviewing what happens during negotiation. Learner variables, variables related to the context of interaction, the tasks used, the mode of interaction and the atmosphere in the classroom or in natural settings are all important considerations in conversational interactions. Arguments against negotiation do not appear to be very sound because there is research that goes against them. As long as the role of interaction is considered vital for language acquisition, negotiation will remain a good language teaching technique that can enhance language learning and push the process of language development further.

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