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The Role of Negotiation of Meaning in L2 Interactions: An Analysis from the Perspective of Long's Interaction Hypothesis

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Abstract

This study examines how negotiation of meaning contributes to second language interaction. The discussion in this study is based on Michael H. Long's 1996 Interaction Hypothesis suggesting that environment contributes to the development of second language acquisition. Long proposes that environmental contributions to acquisition are mediated by selective attention and the learner's processing capacity during negotiation for meaning. To support this belief, recent empirical studies are also presented in this article. Three negotiation for meaning strategies are discussed in this study to mirror and provide evidence for Long's proposal, including several excerpts from conversations collected from daily natural conversations and other recorded sources. The strategies include (1) clarification requests, (2) confirmation checks, and (3) comprehension checks. The study has been able to prove that learner's L2 acquisition takes advantage of environmental contributions mediated by selective attention and the learner's developing L2 processing capacity brought together during negotiation of meaning.

Keywords: Negotiation of meaning, Long's Interaction Hypothesis, interaction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the last decades, different studies in second language acquisition have explored different issues pertaining to how different languages are learned and used as a medium of communication. In a communication where the language(s) being used is/are not the speakers' first language, the way communication is conducted requires fairly demanding efforts by the speakers. Unlike what we tend to believe, this type of communication is much more complicated than just choosing a word in a target language and putting it into a sentence. As a matter of fact, the way humans utilize

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language is primarily dependent on the objective of communication and the message being articulated.

This paper will discuss different negotiation of meaning strategies commonly used by second language learners in their interactions. The discussion of each particular strategy will follow Michael H. Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis about the contribution of environment in language acquisition. This paper is organized sequentially. In the first section, literature review related to L2 interaction from different perspectives is presented. Following this, a brief discussion of empirical data about interaction among L2 learners is discussed to give us a richer understanding about how L2 interaction generally takes place between L2 learners and between L2 learners and native speakers. The empirical data presented in this paper is mainly the representation of many previous research studies already conducted on this topic.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Before moving further into the discussions in this paper, an initial introduction to the work of Michael H. Long in relation to the current topic being investigated is presented. The following quotation from Long's 1996 version of his Interaction Hypothesis may be considered as the heart of this paper.

It is proposed that environmental contributions to acquisition are mediated by selective attention and the learner's developing L2 processing capacity, and that these resources are brought together most usefully, although not exclusively, during negotiation for meaning. Negative feedback obtained during negotiation work or elsewhere may be facilitative of L2 development, at least for vocabulary, morphology, and language-specific syntax, and essential for learning certain specifiable L1-L2 contrasts. (Long, 1996, p. 414)

Here, it is clear that Long sees interaction as a very important facilitating factor in L2 acquisition success. Although many others may argue about this, the writer tends to agree that, in L2 development, the environment in which a learner is exposed to plays a vital role in affecting the learning process. This includes any kinds of positive interaction that the learner contributes into his/her own learning.

Furthermore, Mackey (2007) mentioned that based on Long's (1996) argument, the contribution given by interaction in facilitating L2 acquisition has to do with conversation and linguistic modification which takes place in such conditions and, consequently, gives learners various possibilities to have access to input necessary for their learning. Similarly, Long (1981) also suggests that adjustments in conversation promote comprehension of input and that input promotes acquisition. From this, it is clear that interaction contributes positively to L2 acquisition. However, to what extent these contributions will have impact on L2 acquisition is an interesting issue to explore.

2.1 What is Interaction?

Generally, interaction is defined as a type of communication between two interlocutors (Fernández-García & Martínez-Arbeláiz, 2002). It involves a changing sequence of social actions between individuals (or groups) who modify their actions

and reactions due to the actions of their interaction partner. For instance, when someone articulates something to another person and this person replies in turn, the two people are performing a type of interaction. Interaction does not necessarily take place among human beings only; it is also performed by others such as animals and other creatures.

From the second language learning point of view, the term interaction has a more complex meaning. Long (1981), for example, recognized the term interaction as a function served by linguistic forms (inputs) being used by language users. Ellis (2003), in addition, defines interaction as the social behaviour that occurs when one person communicates with another and this may happen both in interpersonal and intrapersonal settings. By this, it simply means that interaction may take place in many different forms depending on the context and needs of the communicators.

2.2 The Importance of Interaction in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

As previously mentioned, interaction provides many benefits especially to second language learners. Linguists have been arguing about the role of interaction in L2 learning. Both Hatch (1978) and Ellis (2003), for instance, tend to believe that learners learn a language through conversation and interaction, and, out of this, structures are then developed. From this, we can see a disagreement with the belief that learners first learn syntactic structures and then use them in whatever form of discourse they encounter. Furthermore, an empirical study by Long (1981) suggests that, in NS – NNS conversations, modifications take place more in interactions than in the NS's input.

In his other paper, Long (1996, p. 451-452) suggests that “negotiation for meaning, especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the NS or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input with internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways”. This suggestion has been able to convince us that L2 acquisition takes more advantage from interaction efforts attempted by L2 learners (Mackey, 1999).

In research involving native and non-native speakers of English at a famous American university, Gass and Varonis (1994) discovered that the results of interaction are not necessarily immediate. It was suggested that interactions may not affect the conversation in which the interaction takes place. Therefore, it is totally understandable that the effect of interaction in L2 development may take place some time later until it is fully applied. With regard to this proposal, Gass, Mackey and Pica (1998) tend to believe that, as Long (1996) has pointed out, there are many factors involved in L2 learning, where interaction is believed to be a facilitative factor. Therefore, they suggest that interaction should not be considered as the only factor benefiting L2 acquisition.

2.3 Negotiation of Meaning

When referring to the term ‘interaction’, many linguists are also interested in talking about negotiation for meaning. This term refers to the process through which the speakers go to clearly comprehend one another (Gass, Mackey & Ross-Feldman, 2005). This includes strategies like asking for clarification, rephrasing, and confirming what has already been understood throughout the conversation. In classroom practices, these strategies appear in such different activities as jigsaw games, information gaps, and spot the difference quizzes. Oliver (2002) believes that speakers also use different patterns of interaction according to the age of the speakers and the context of exchanges.

A simple example for negotiation of meaning in conversation will be illustrated in the following extract from Gass and Varonis (1985, 1985b), retrieved from Oliver (2002, p. 98):

A : It is a – one tree. One tree.
B : What?
A : One tree
B : One tree?
A : Yes.
B : One tree
A : In the –
B : What one t(h)ree mean?
A : Tree
B : One tree?
A : Yes, tree. Tree.

From this extract, we can see that negotiation for meaning includes those interactions within a dialogue between 'A' and 'B' where some obvious signs that shared understanding has not been achieved between the two speakers. In the first turn, speaker 'A' starts the conversation with 'B' by saying 'one tree', which unexpectedly caused problematic misunderstanding between them. Several turns take place in their conversation until each of them is able to clarify and confirm what is initially meant and what is finally comprehended. In these exchanges, both of them evidently practice different negotiation of meaning strategies in their interaction.

In terms of NS and NNS pairings, various studies have discovered that when speakers are paired together, NS-NNS pairs produce greater amount of negotiation than NNS-NS pairs (Gass & Varonis, 1985a, 1985b). Similarly, both NNS-NNS and NNS-NS dyads usually produce more negotiation for meaning than that which a NS-NS pair would do (Ellis, 1985; Long, 1980, 1983a; Pica & Doughty, 1985b, 1988; Wesche & Ready, 1985; as quoted in Oliver, 2002). This is due to some kinds of gaps in understanding between the two different languages being used by the communicators. These gaps can appear due to incorrect pronunciation, unclear meaning, or even as simple as the omission of small items like prepositions.

2.4 Recent Empirical Studies

In a study conducted by Gass and Varonis (1994), the relationship among input, interaction, and second language production has been investigated through data from NS-NNS interactions. Conversation data from 16 NS-NNS dyads, which were enrolled in an intensive language program at a large university in the United States, have been used to support the research. The participants were assigned to a specially designed experimental design consisting of two speaking task trials. The research found that both modified input and interaction affected task performance although only interaction had an effect on subsequent task performance.

Furthermore, in more recent research conducted by Oliver (2002), conversations between children 8 - 13 years old were examined. The 192 participants were paired to form 96 age-and gender-matched dyads of native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS): 32 NNS-NS, 48 NNS-NNS, and 16 NS-NS dyads. Similar to the

research conducted by Gass and Varonis (1994), the pairs in this study were also assigned to get involved in communication tasks. The results suggested that, in children's interactions, the 'nativeness' and proficiency of pairings influenced the amount of negotiation for meaning that took place. This research claims and supports the previous research by Gass and Varonis (1985a, 1985b) which states that both NNS-NNS and NNS-NS dyads perform more negotiation for meaning than do the NS-NS. However, Oliver (2002) doubts that the result of this study is comparable to that of studies of adults as age and gender comparisons showed no significant differences.

3. METHOD

The general purpose of this paper is to broaden our perspective on the contribution given by L2 interaction, during negotiation of meaning for L2 acquisition, in regards to Long's 1996 'Interaction Hypothesis'. The main question addressed in this paper is: *"To what extent does L2 interaction contribute to L2 acquisition and which strategies are chosen by native and non-native speakers in dealing with negotiation of meaning?"* In order to answer this question, different empirical studies were compared and contrasted in the next section of this paper. The result of the discussions is expected to expand our point of view and hopefully to sharpen our understanding about the contribution of interaction in L2 learning.

4. FINDINGS

The study has been able to highlight some different strategies used by L2 learners in negotiation for meaning during their interactions. According to Lee (2001), several major strategies used by language speakers in dealing with negotiation for meaning include clarification requests, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks. These strategies will be discussed in the following sub-sections for further understanding.

4.1 Clarification Requests

A clarification request is an important strategy used by speakers in making sure that the message is transferred properly in a communication (Samuelsson & Lyxell, 2013). Generally, the speaking partner requests for clarification when one or more words being articulated by the speaker are not clear and therefore need to be re-explained. As argued by Pica (1987), speakers can maximize their receptive and expressive capacity if they can obtain more interlocutors' assistance in communication. Therefore, it is believed that such help occurs when they ask for clarification from the speaker to clarify the meaning of a message being articulated. The following examples give a clear understanding about this issue.

Excerpt 1:

NS interlocutor : Did you go shopping with your mom or with your friends?
 NNS : No no I – what? What you say? [asking for clarification]
 NS interlocutor : Did you go to the mall with your mom or with your friends?
 NNS : Go to mall?

NS interlocutor : Yes.
NNS : Oh! With my friends.

The selection has been adapted from the writer's personal classroom experience. From this example, it is clear that the NNS partner somehow cannot grasp the message being articulated by the NS interlocutor. He then asks the interlocutor to repeat what has just been said in order to get better understanding (Mackey, 1999). Most of the time, this type of clarification request is done with rising intonation, sometimes by repeating, to make sure that the interlocutor gets the real purpose of the clarification request. In addition to this, the speaker usually uses a more polite 'clarification mark' to get the message repeated, as in the following example:

Excerpt 2:

NS interlocutor : Look! It is flying over the bridge.
NNS : Say again, please! [asking for clarification]
NS interlocutor : The bird is flying over the bridge, isn't it?
NNS : Mmhm.

In Excerpt 2, it is clear that the second speaker (NNS) seems unable to understand what has been articulated by the NS interlocutor. Instead of saying 'what', which is somehow impolite at some point, 'say again, please' is used to politely clarify with the interlocutor what has just been said. These types of request for assistance help organize the contact between the two speakers so that the meaning of unfamiliar linguistic material contained within the interlocutor's message can be reworded for better understanding. As a result, the speakers have obviously been able to understand each other and their communicational interaction has been undertaken effectively.

4.2 Confirmation Checks

The following two examples have been adapted from the original Pica's (1987, p. 5) examples to give appropriate examples about confirmation checks in daily L2 interactions. A few changes have been made for proper use.

Excerpt 3:

NS interlocutor : Did Andy get high marks? I mean good scores?
NNS : High marks? [confirmation check]
NS interlocutors : Good grades, like 80 and 90. Did he get those scores?
NNS : Oh, maybe. I am not sure.

Excerpt 4:

NS interlocutor : Do you need any help?
NNS : Yes. Can you pos this?
NS interlocutor : Pose? Post? [confirmation check]
NNS : No. You send this letter, at the post office you know?
NS interlocutor : Oh yes. POST!
NNS : Yes. Can you please post this?
NS interlocutor : Sure!

From the two examples in Excerpt 3 and Excerpt 4, we can clearly see that confirmation checks are taking place. In Excerpt 3, first of all, NNS tries to confirm an unclear term freshly articulated by the interlocutor. His asking for clarification is so clear to the interlocutor that another term 'good grades' is used to replace, perhaps to emphasize, previous terms and to re-explain what has been communicated previously. The result shows that the NNS L2 learner gains better understanding and suddenly responds to the question.

In Excerpt 4, by contrast, the NS interlocutor is the one who initiates a confirmation check. In this example, it is perhaps important to point out that the mistake made by the NNS is not in the spelling of the word 'post'. In fact, the speaker has not been able to pronounce the word correctly, and this has resulted in limited understanding by the NS interlocutor, who then performs a confirmation check by repeating two possibly relevant words correctly to confirm which one is meant by the NNS. Surprisingly, this triggers the NNS to rephrase the word in a clearer form of sentence. The NS interlocutor immediately understands the NNS's message and responds to the question straight away.

Obviously, these two types of confirmation checks benefit L2 learners in many ways. One of the possible benefits that we can clearly see from these extracts is that they trigger more and further communication. Obviously, L2 learners will be strongly encouraged to talk when a confirmation check takes place, especially when it is triggered by the NS interlocutor.

4.3. Comprehension Checks

Comprehension checks are commonly used in communication both by native and non-native speakers. They are used to check a speaker's comprehension of the message being communicated. To clearly understand how comprehension checks take place in communication, let us have a look at the following extract or example from a conversation:.

Excerpt 5:

NS interlocutor : What are you talking about?
 NNS : Sta.....
 NS interlocutor : Sta.....?
 NNS : Yes. Something made with concrete like real man, animal. But fake.
 You know what I mean?
 NS interlocutor : Hhhmmm.
 NNS : Like Liberty in New York, understand?
 NS interlocutor : Oh yes. STATUE!
 NNS : Yes, statue.

In this particular example, it is obvious that, at the initial stage, the delivery of the message from the NNS to the NS interlocutor is not running smoothly due to NNS's lexical limitations. The word 'statue' is the core problem in this conversation, and therefore the interlocutor seeks further confirmation. The NNS, in turn, does the job explaining in his best way to assure that the message he is trying to deliver arrives appropriately. Instead of trying to repeat the word he is currently unsure of, the NNS makes a big challenge paraphrasing the word into an understandable sentence.

Obviously, he is not doing this because he wants to test NS's lexical understanding. The only reason this is happening is because the NNS does not have the word in his lexical recall but he is trying to ensure himself that his speaking partner has got the message correctly. Following his explanation, he then checks NS's comprehension by asking 'you know what I mean'?

At this stage, the NS interlocutor is still unable to grasp the message, causing the NNS to try a second time to explain by saying 'liberty' as a clue for the word 'statue' he was initially trying to say. He also checks the NS's comprehension by adding the word 'understand' at the end of his sentence. At last, the message is conveyed and they both finally understand each other.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The explorations for this study have demonstrated various interconnections between aspects of L2 interaction through negotiation of meaning and L2 acquisition. Long's 1996 "Interaction Hypothesis" says that learners' L2 acquisition, to a certain degree, benefits from environmental contributions mediated by selective attention and the learner's developing L2 processing capacity brought together during negotiation of meaning. We also know that negative feedback obtained during this process may be facilitative of L2 development.

As Fernández-García and Martínez-Arbelaiz (2002) has pointed out, many second language literatures have identified negotiation routines in oral interactions in which learners give and receive feedback to contribute to each other's conversation. In their research investigating Spanish learners' engagement in negotiation when exchanging ideas in synchronous computer-mediated interaction, they claim that negotiation of meaning can take place in different ways including in the discussion mediated by electronic devices. This has confirmed that the role of negotiation for meaning is very obvious in a second language environment.

With regards to Long's hypothesis, we can now corroborate that the role of negotiation for meaning in interaction is obvious. It is clearly noticeable that L2 learners benefit from such interactional activities as requesting for clarification and confirmation and comprehension checks. When interaction takes place, these activities benefit NN learners either taking the role as interlocutor or as the listener. Accordingly, from our discussions above, the following points may be proposed:

1. Second language learners should be encouraged to negotiate for meaning during L2 interactions so that positive development in the target language can be accelerated.
2. Native interlocutors can be reliable partners particularly in helping non-native L2 learners in prompting negotiation for meaning activities.

Finally, as mentioned by Mitchell, Myles & Marsden (2013), it is still unknown why some L2 features can be learned more easily through interaction than others. This perhaps would be an important topic to be investigated for further studies in this field. Future researchers may consider doing more in depth research which examines how negotiation for meaning activities are developed in particular interactions amongst non-native language learners.

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