

THE PATTERNS OF NEGOTIATION
OF MEANING IN SYNCHRONOUS
COMPUTER-MEDIATED
CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

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ROZINA BT. ABDUL GHANI

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CONTENTS

	<i>Tables & Figures</i>	<i>vi</i>
	<i>Charts</i>	
	<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
Chapter 1	INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter 2	BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY	8
Chapter 3	LITERATURE REVIEW	51
Chapter 4	METHODOLOGY	83
Chapter 5	FINDINGS	126
Chapter 6	DISCUSSION	139
Chapter 7	CONCLUSION	149
	 <i>BIBLIOGRAPHY</i>	 155

TABLES & FIGURES

Tables

Table	Page
2.1 Levels of the Academic Courses	20
3.1 Some Strategies for Negotiation of Meaning	20
4.1 Demographic Information of Students	85
4.2 The Assigned Topics for Online Discussion	91
4.3 Data Collection Planning Matrix	93
5.1 The Distribution of Task-Related Output, Off-Task Output and Total Overall Output	116
5.2 Percentage of Negotiation of Meaning Turns Over Total Task Related Turns	117
5.3 Percentage of Negotiation Routines Over Total Routines	118
5.4 The Total and Percentages of Task Related Output and Off-Task Output of All Classes	129
5.5 The Themes for The Highest and Lowest Negotiation Turns of All Classes	130
5.6 The Total Negotiation of Meaning Turns	134
5.7 Types of Triggers of All Classes	136
5.8 Type of Indicators by Classes	141
5.9 Types of Responses of All Classes	146
5.10 Types of Reaction To Responses (RR) by Classes	151
5.11 Total & Percentages of NOM Turns	162
5.12 Total and Percentage of Responses of All Classes	163
5.13 The Percentages of Responses Over Total Negotiation of Meaning Turns of Each Class	164

Figures

Figure		Page
3.1	Varonis and Gass's (1985) Model for Negotiation of Meaning	8
3.2	The Division of Negotiation of Meaning Routines	13
3.3	Smith's (2003) Expansion of Varonis and Gass's Model for NOM	14
4.1	Model for NNS Negotiation of Meaning Routines	17
4.2	Subcategories of Negotiation Routine Stages	18

CHARTS

Chart		Page
2.1	Structure of the University's English Placement Test (EPT)	23
5.2	Total Negotiation of Meaning of All Classes	113
5.3	Total Negotiation of Meaning Steps by Classes	114

PREFACE

This book discusses the patterns of negotiation of meaning in an open-ended small group synchronous computer-mediated classroom discussion (CMCD) amongst intermediate ESL/EFL learners. Most research has dwelled on the quantitative aspect of online discussion between dyads. There is, however, a dearth of research on the quality of non-native speakers' online interaction conducted in small groups. In this study, a purposeful sampling of 67 students from three intermediate ESL/EFL classes engaged in synchronous online classroom discussion. The data were gathered from the discourse analysis of the online discussion, the content analysis of the participant observation, semi-structured interview of all the students and the course documentation. The data of the students' discussion triangulated with the descriptive statistics of their online output, the semi-structured interviews, the participant observation and course documentation demonstrated that well-defined open-ended tasks could indeed foster negotiation of meaning. The rigorous analysis reveals quality negotiation of meaning even though the quantity was relatively small. The learners, however, seldom modified their interlanguage towards the target language form. Lexical and content difficulties triggered most of the negotiations. The negotiation experience also led the learners towards metalinguistic awareness through self-correction and corrective feedback within and outside the negotiation routines. In addition, the students liked the textual nature of online communication. Students perceived that open-ended tasks were meaningful as they were compelled to use a wide range of vocabulary and structures. This study demonstrates that language task, classroom management, learners' language proficiency and computer skills are important factors to be considered when incorporating CMCD into teaching and learning as these may affect the linguistic quality of online negotiation.

ROZINA BT. ABDUL GHANI

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s, national and international networks and local area networks (LANs) have been widely used as aids for instructional purposes. This interactive media includes the use of electronic mail, bulletin boards, or discussion lists on worldwide networks such as the Internet. All these support features help learners to be actively engaged in the process of learning. They also enable access to, and sharing of, information in a time- and space-independent fashion.

From this interactive technological network, innovative types of communication, namely network-based communication (NBC) or computer-mediated communication (CMC) have emerged. These new technologies (which include e-mail and chat) are being used increasingly in second language (L2) and foreign language (FL) learning environments. Teachers experiment with the technology by introducing learners to classroom discussion via the computer. Thus, the terms computer-mediated classroom discussion (CMCD) or computer-assisted classroom discussion (CACD) have come about. Computers are now considered as a new medium that has changed the ways in which learners write, read, and possibly think (Selfe, 1989). In short, computers have offered an alternative means of communications for learners as well as for teachers.

The emergence of networked-communication has led many teachers to regard the computer as an even more promising tool for language learning. Network-based communication (NBC) or computer-mediated communication (CMC) allows learners to interact with each other as well as with native speakers from a country where the target language being learnt is spoken. It is, therefore, not surprising that CMC has become one of the interests of educational research in recent years. The computer

makes it possible for students and teachers to interact actively not only through written means but, now, through verbal and visual means. This technological facility increases students' opportunities for collaboration and active participation, free from the constraints of time and space. It suggests that NBC or CMC may contribute to strengthening all the skills required in language learning.

Many studies (e.g. Chun, 1994; Kern, 1995; Ortega, 1997; Warschauer, 1998) have been dedicated to discovering the potential of NBC or CMC in enhancing language learning. However, Chapelle (2000) found that most of the studies done in the area of CMC lack the theoretical foundation that could direct the findings. She suggests that studies looking at the application of CMC need to be situated within the realm of second language acquisition (SLA) theory in order to understand how the medium could benefit second language learners. Therefore, in order to sufficiently evaluate the potential of CMCD as a pedagogical tool for the language classroom, that is, as a tool that will benefit the learners' linguistic development, this investigation must be tied to a theory that seeks to explain how this development takes place. Therefore, this study utilizes the Interactionist

Hypothesis that propagates "interactional modifications" which was later renamed "negotiation of meaning" by Long (1996). Long proposes that peer interaction in any language task promotes comprehensible input and negotiated interaction which are essential conditions for language growth. Interaction refers to a situation in which speakers direct their speech to each other; and negotiation of meaning is a type of interaction where interlocutors adjust their speech phonologically, lexically, and syntactically to resolve difficulties in understanding (Pica, 1992).

Central to the discussion of negotiation of meaning is the issue of comprehensible input for the L2 learner. Long (1981 cited in Fidalgo-Eick, 2001; 1983) opines that speech modifications that native speakers (NS) use when talking to non-native speakers (NNS) may serve to make comprehensible input. He suggests that "interactional modifications" (1983:126) are strategies used by NS when talking to NNS to make their input comprehensible and also to keep the conversation going by

employing strategies such as stressing key words, requesting clarifications, making new topics salient, and using a slow pace, among others. These modifications are essential in promoting comprehension since comprehension is necessary for acquisition. Thus, Long summarizes the relationship of adjustments, comprehension and acquisition that occur in negotiations, in three stages namely:

Step 1: adjustments promote comprehension

Step 2: comprehension promotes acquisition

Step 3: adjustments promote acquisition

This implies that conversational modifications or language adjustments are integral to comprehension as this is of considerable benefit to L2 acquisition. In order to promote negotiation, learners need to be in an environment that triggers interaction. In other words, interaction plays an important role in comprehension as interaction is involved in all the three steps.