

# **ON THE INCIDENCE AND EFFECT OF NEGOTIATION OF FORM AND MEANING IN GROUP WORK ACTIVITIES: CONTRASTING THEORETICAL CLAIMS WITH CLASSROOM REALITY**

**Miroslaw Pawlak**

## **Introduction**

A number of SLA theorists and researchers subscribe to the view that comprehensible input is insufficient to ensure L2 development and learners need to actively participate in interactions of different kinds for acquisition to occur. They attach particular importance to exchanges where learners or their interlocutors experience difficulty in comprehending each other's utterances, and work interactively either to ward off an impending communication breakdown, or to accomplish mutual understanding once it has occurred. A logical corollary of this stance is that such negotiated sequences should be encouraged in the language classroom as a way of aiding students in the restructuring of their interlanguage systems.

At the same time, however, it is salutary to exercise caution about uncritically following such recommendations and pinning excessive hopes on the contributions of negotiation of form and meaning. This is because the relevant theoretical claims are far from being universally accepted, and the research findings invoked in their support come from relatively few studies mostly conducted in second rather than foreign language contexts, frequently with students representing diverse L1 backgrounds and interacting in laboratory conditions. Therefore, it seems warranted to conduct research which would verify such predictions in real classrooms, in settings where learners share their mother tongue and have limited out-of-school exposure to the target language. The present paper contributes to this line of enquiry by exploring the occurrence and value of negotiated interaction in pair and group work tasks conducted during regularly scheduled English lessons in Polish secondary school.

## **Definitions, scope and value of negotiated interaction**

Ellis (1999: 3) defines negotiated interaction as "the conversational exchanges that arise when interlocutors seek to prevent a communicative impasse occurring or to remedy an actual impasse that has arisen". More precisely, exchanges of this kind involve "the modification and restructuring of interaction that occurs when learners and their interlocutors anticipate, perceive, or experience difficulties in message comprehensibility. As they negotiate, they work linguistically to achieve the needed comprehensibility, whether repeating a message verbatim, adjusting its syntax, changing its words, or modifying its form and meaning in a host of other ways" (Pica 1994: 494). Although such definitions might imply that negotiation mainly serves the purpose of resolving genuine communication breakdowns, recent research demonstrates that it can also be used to address persistent errors in learners' speech, thus acting as an option in teaching grammar (Ellis 2006).

As Varonis and Gass (1985) found, negotiated sequences have a definite structure and consist of (1) a *trigger*, which is an imprecise or erroneous utterance (e.g. 'The house is painting'), (2) an *indicator*, where the problem is signaled by the interlocutor (e.g. 'Sorry?'), (3) a *response*, in which the speaker attempts to fix the problem (e.g. 'is

paint... painted'), and, optionally, (4) a *reaction to the response* ('oh, yes, I get it') by means of which the reception of the message is acknowledged. The devices which typically perform the function of indicators include such conversational strategies as *comprehension checks*, (e.g. 'Do you understand?'), *clarification requests* ('I beg your pardon?') or *confirmation checks* (e.g. 'S. She lived in the lock T. In the lock?'). While the former serves to head off potential communication breakdowns, the latter two are employed to address problems that have already arisen and, when the negotiation work is successful, allow the interaction to proceed. It should also be noted that the ensuing exchanges often result in *modified input*, which has been adjusted to facilitate comprehension, or *modified output*, which closer approximates the TL norm (cf. Ellis 1999). Although it is commonly believed that negotiated interaction aids language development, the views on the nature and scope of its beneficial effect are a function of the theoretical approach adopted. According to the early version of Long's (1983) Interaction Hypothesis, negotiation does not directly contribute to acquisition and its value lies in the fact that it makes input comprehensible when learners come across problematic language forms. Subsequent research findings showing that comprehension does not necessarily ensure acquisition as well as the claims that it is *processed* rather than *comprehended input* that is crucial, however, led Long (1996) to propose a modified version of the hypothesis. The new formulation emphasizes the role of negotiated interaction in facilitating noticing, which is believed to help learners process input for intake (Schmidt 1994), and posits that interactional modifications contribute to acquisition through the provision of: (1) positive evidence (i.e. language samples that show what is grammatical or acceptable), (2) negative evidence (i.e. information about what is grammatical in the form of explicit or implicit corrective feedback), and (3) opportunities for modified output (i.e. such that is adjusted in the direction of the TL).

The later version of the Interaction Hypothesis ties in all crucial respects with Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis, according to which pushing learners to produce output that is accurate, appropriate, coherent and precise promotes syntactic rather than semantic processing, thus fostering the processes of noticing, internal comparison and, ultimately, interlanguage growth. Apart from the somewhat obvious observation that TL production leads to greater fluency, Swain (1995) discusses three functions of output with regard to accuracy and these include: (1) fostering consciousness-raising, (2) enabling hypothesis-testing, and (3) allowing metatalk about TL forms. As mentioned above, it is such broader perspectives on the contributions of interactional modifications that have led researchers to view negotiation as a tool teachers can draw upon in teaching language forms (e.g. Ellis 2001). This is evident in the distinction that is sometimes made between *conversational reactive focus on form*, which occurs in response to a communication breakdown, and *didactic reactive focus on form*, where errors in learners' speech are addressed although they do not impede comprehension (Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen 2002).

### **Research design**

The study sought to gain insights in the following areas: (1) the frequency with which learners negotiate form and meaning in pair and group work tasks, (2) the impact of the use of conversational strategies on the occurrence of modified output, (3) the quality of such output, and (4) the occurrence of negotiated interaction and modified output as a function of task type and participant variables. The data analyzed with a view to addressing such issues comprised transcripts of 112 instances of pair and

group work activities which came from recordings made during regularly scheduled classes in the course of other research projects conducted by the author. The activities included 24 information-gap tasks, 16 dictogloss tasks, 20 role plays, 46 guided conversations and 6 problem-solving activities. To use a distinction that is viewed as consequential as regards the occurrence of negotiation of form and meaning, 24 activities were instances of *required information exchange tasks*, where key information is distributed among participants and interaction is thus indispensable, and 88 could be regarded as *optional information exchange tasks*, in which the students have access to the same data and contributions of all group members are by no means guaranteed. As for the students whose interactions were audio-taped, they were Polish secondary school learners representing preintermediate and intermediate proficiency levels, or A2 and B1 in terms of the *Common European Framework*.

The data were subjected to a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis as dictated by the requirements of particular research questions. The former involved: (1) counting the instances of negotiated interaction, (2) tabulating the cases where negotiation led to modified output, and (3) breaking the numbers down for different types of tasks (i.e. required vs. optional information exchange) and indicators (i.e. clarification requests vs. confirmation checks). As to the latter, it consisted in: (1) examining the nature of negotiated sequences, (2) investigating the quality of modified output in terms of its accuracy and complexity, (3) exploring alternative means of solving communication breakdowns, and (4) investigating the impact of participant variables (i.e. proficiency level and gender) in all of these areas.

### **Research findings**

The numerical analysis yielded 74 instances of negotiated interaction in the transcripts, which means that there was on average 0.66 exchange of this kind per task and speaks to the relative paucity of such situations. It turned out that the incidence of negotiation was to a large extent a function of the type of activity, and it was more frequent in required information exchange (26 cases or 1.08 per task) than in optional information exchange tasks (48 instances or 0.55 per task), a finding which is in line with those of previous research (e.g. Foster 1998). As regards the types of conversational strategies employed to initiate negotiated sequences, 42 (56,76%) of those were confirmation checks whereas 32 (43,24%) clarification requests.

In 38 (51.35%) cases, the utilization of an indicator resulted in the alteration of the original message, which indicates that there was on average 0.34 output modification per task. What is of particular interest, the learners were equally likely to adjust their productions in response to clarification requests and confirmation checks, with 19 instances of modified output in each category, which stands in contrast to the claims of some researchers (e.g. Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen 2002). Not only was the incidence of output modifications rather low, but, in the vast majority of cases, the changes the learners made to their messages were minimal and did not lead to substantial elaboration or simplification of the utterance. Moreover, only on three occasions did a negotiated sequence lead to greater accuracy of learner output. The following excerpts illustrate some of these points:

- (1) S1. *there... there is a kettle*  
S2. *kettle?*

*S1. yes kettle (the word is simply repeated by the speaker)*

(2) *S1. (...) there is also some garbage and*

*S2. ... what does it mean garbage*

*S1. garbage is the trash... trash (...) (the problematic item is replaced with its equivalent)*

(3) *S1. the house I found out is situated in Washington (mispronounced and unintelligible)*

*S2. in where?*

*S1. in Washington (the student self-corrects by using more targetlike pronunciation)*

Another important finding was that the negotiated sequences were predominantly triggered by genuine problems with message comprehension, and thus were illustrative of conversational rather than didactic reactive focus on form. This demonstrates that the students were generally reluctant to highlight errors in the speech of their peers and, as the analysis of the interaction showed, in situations when they decided to do so, they resorted to more explicit types of corrective feedback. In the exchange below, for example, it was apparently genuine lack of understanding that prompted S2 to employ a confirmation check.

(4) *S1. she has written forty books*

*S2. four books?*

*S1. ... forty books*

It is also important to point out that, on many occasions, confirmation checks appeared to act as time-gaining devices or an acknowledgement of what a peer has said rather than a signal of non-comprehension. This shows that we should be circumspect about interpreting the use of such strategies as a prelude to negotiation of form and meaning, and, in fact, could be taken to mean that genuine cases of negotiated interaction were even less frequent than the numbers might indicate. Additionally, many exchanges that were coded as instances of negotiation contained words and phrases in Polish, which further reduced their value and could have rendered them ineffective had the interlocutors differed with respect to their L1 background. Of vital importance is also the fact that the transcripts contained numerous exchanges where only Polish was used to clear up misunderstandings or get more complicated messages across, which proves that just getting students to interact in small groups does not guarantee the occurrence of negotiation or ensure its beneficial effects. The following excerpts illustrate some of these points:

(5) *S1. ok tell me something about services*

*S2. services?... so ah... students are taken to the city (...) (the repetition can serve both as a confirmation check and a time-gaining device)*

(6) *S1. (...) and what about famous people?*

*S2. famous people? (this could be an acknowledgement of what has been said)*

*S1. yes*

*S2. very often famous people are visited this hotel*

- (7) *S1. she wanted to talk with someone and he ... didn't wanted*  
*S2. she ... czy or he?(Polish is used alongside English in the indicator)*  
*S1. she didn't wanted to boring*

Finally, it should be noted that the learners' proficiency level or gender had little effect on the incidence and outcomes of negotiated sequences, although this finding can only be tentative due to the fact that the groups were not specifically matched to investigate the impact of such variables. A far more important observation was that there was a lot of variation between pairs and groups in all of the areas investigated, which constitutes one more argument for viewing the findings as preliminary and justifies conducting further research.

### **Conclusions and pedagogical implications**

As can be seen from the foregoing discussion, negotiation of form and meaning is likely to be infrequent in situations where students have access to a shared L1 and its contributions to language development are much more modest than predicted by some theoretical models. Obviously, the findings only testify to the difficulty involved in ensuring the occurrence of negotiated interaction in the foreign language classroom and do not provide evidence against its value. On the contrary, there are grounds to assume that interaction of this kind does facilitate language development and there can be little doubt that the ability to negotiate is an invaluable asset in out-of-class communication.

Logically, then, some kind of training in the use of negotiation appears indispensable. This could involve making students aware of the importance of pair and group work activities, demonstrating how negotiation can reduce L1 use, showing how conversational strategies can be used to respond to errors, providing examples of successful output modifications, teaching phrases that can be drawn upon to overcome communication breakdowns, setting up tasks necessitating negotiated interaction, as well as ensuring that meaning and form are regularly negotiated in classroom discourse. It stands to reason that following such guidelines is likely to ensure greater reliance on the TL in resolving communication problems, more high quality output modifications and, ultimately, greater learning opportunities.

Last but not least, it is clearly necessary to conduct further research into negotiated interaction in foreign language contexts. In particular, such studies should center around examining the impact of different variables on the occurrence and effects of negotiation, exploring its long-term effect on acquisition, and examining the feasibility of training learners to negotiate form and meaning. Only by conducting this kind of research in our own instructional settings can we verify the relevance of theoretical claims, and ensure that our classrooms become more acquisition-rich environments.

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