

# Identifying Negotiation for Meaning Strategies Among Low Proficient Learners

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on Long's (1985, 1996) cognitive and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, this study used peer interaction to identify conversational interaction strategies that low proficient learners employ when completing communicative tasks. This study was conducted to document negotiation for meaning strategies when low proficient learners who study in a private EMI university were completing communicating tasks. The results of this study explained that the learners preferred to use confirmation checks and clarification requests to negotiate for meaning, where these findings were not much different from previous studies. However, this present study is expected to provide insights to language teachers on how these tasks can provide opportunities for low proficient learners to practice and develop their oral skills with the assistance of their peers.

**Keywords:** *Communicative tasks, low proficient learners, negotiation for meaning, peer interaction*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

To provide language opportunities in the language classroom, peer interaction using communicative tasks has been widely implemented, and learners can practice the target language with their peers (Gass & Mackey, 2007; Philp, Adam, & Iwashita, 2013; Storch & Aldosari, 2013, Swain & Watanabe, 2012). The reason for this is peer interaction is believed to promote second language (L2) learning. Learners will be able to gain new input of the target language, receive feedback as well as modify their output by interacting with their peers (Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos, & Linnell, 1996).

When discussing about NfM, it is necessary to date back to the earliest Krashen's (1981) theory of comprehensible input theory. In language learning, comprehensible input or "i+1" means that learners will be able to obtain knowledge of L2 when the input provided is one level above the current learners' level. Long (1985, 1996) proposes verbal interaction as one way to provide learners with rich opportunities for comprehensible input. During interaction, learners might deal with problem utterances, and to comprehend the conversation both speaker and/or interlocutor have to adjust their utterances. This process where learners negotiate in the conversation is called negotiation for meaning (NfM) in the forms of clarification requests, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks. A

growing body of research investigating the NfM types in interaction and the role of NfM in L2 acquisition has been tremendously conducted either with Native Speakers (NS) (Long, 1981, 1983) or Non-Native Speakers (NNSs) (Kawaguchi & Ma, 2012).

Another theory that supports peer interaction is sociocultural theory. Vygotsky (1978) proposes the idea that environment around students can provide opportunities for language learners to improve learners' cognitive development or to repair their linguistic and cognitive hurdles. Sociocultural perspectives believe that learning a target language involve individuals to carry out interaction, it is not an activity that is carried out individually. When learners carry out social interactions, they will internalize the knowledge they get from the interaction and produce the input in the form of new knowledge (Devos, 2016). In interaction, Vygotsky believes that participants can help each other so that this is where the process of language internalization or language learning occurs. This process of helping each other is called scaffolding.

Swain (2006) advances Vygotsky's theory stating that in peer interaction learners can express a problem and solve it with their counterparts. This is so-called the languaging process where students make "meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language" (Swain, 2006, p. 98). She states that language is a tool to

help students express what they have already known or what they just learned. They can work together either cooperatively or collaboratively or teach their friends in form of tutoring. Learners can correct each other or check difficulties in using certain words or phrases without having to feel anxious with the presence of the teacher (Philp, Adam, & Iwashita, 2013). In the process, students need other people to carry out a collaborative dialogue where they together "solve a complex cognitive problem using language to mediate problem solutions" (Swain & Watanabe, 2012, p. 1). Therefore, the implementation of peer interaction is pervasive in the L2 classroom and has appealed many researchers to investigate more into negotiation for meaning that learners made during the interaction.

Numerous studies (Kawaguchi & Ma, 2012; Lázaro, & Azpilicueta, 2015; Yusrizal, 2001) have found that doing pair activity can be beneficial for learners to improve their target language proficiency. However, several studies found out that learners' proficiency did not affect the frequency of modified outputs and the quality of interaction. For example, in her study, Iwashita (2001) investigated what impacts that learners' proficiency has on the characteristics of output modification and the numbers of interactional moves (confirmation checks and clarification requests) that learners produced in the interaction. She used 3 levels (high-high, low-low, and mixed) of dyads and paired them with the following pattern: High-High, High-Low, and Low-Low. The study found that low proficient learners worked better with the high proficient learners in the sense that this type of dyads was able to provide more interaction. However, the higher frequency of speech production did not influence the quantity of output modification. In other words, learners might have talked more when pairing up with higher-level learners, but the occurrence of modified output was minimal.

On the other hand, Storch and Aldosari (2013) conducted a study on how to effectively group students. This research was conducted by involving 36 mixed proficiency of Arabic students of English. As in previous studies, this study groups students into 3 types of dyads (High-High, High-Low, and Low-Low) who had to complete a short composition. The study showed that the purpose of the activity greatly influences whether or not the grouping of students is optimal. If the activity aims at language use, then it would be effective to pair up higher and lower proficient learners. However, if the goal of an activity is for learners to gain fluency in the target language, then similar proficiency pairing would be better. In their study, low-level learners when pairing with same level yielded to more collaborative pattern compared to when pairing with their higher counterparts. This is in line with the classes I was usually assigned to where low proficient learners are often found to be passive and reluctant to engage in the classroom activities when they are paired with more

advanced learners. They usually remain silent, let the advanced learners talk or use their native language in completing activities. According to Kowal & Swain (1997), more advanced proficient learners tend to ignore less proficient ones if their proficiency gap is too wide.

This focus of this research is the interaction among non-native learners who have low language proficiency in English. Typically, studies on learner-learner interaction in a language classroom paired up low proficient learners with more advanced learners to understand which pairs generate more modified output and the findings generally suggest that mixed pairs (H-L) are found to be better in producing NfM. However, in the real classroom, most of the learners' proficiency sometimes are still low and it is challenging to pair them up with higher proficiency due to the limited numbers of higher proficient learners. Therefore, this study attempts to find out how peer interaction occurs with low proficient learners who attend an EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) university in Indonesia. They were asked to do three communicative activities which aimed to find out their ability to ask personal details, to invite friends to go out, and to write an informal invitation. This study attempted to investigate what happened in the interaction between low proficient learners when they worked on three communicative tasks by looking at incidents of NfM strategies used by the learners. Based on the description above, this study proposes the following research questions:

1. What negotiation for meaning strategies do low proficient English learners use when completing three communicative tasks?
2. Do the results of this study support previous studies?

## **2. METHOD**

### **2.1. Participants**

Eight students studying in a private EMI university participated in the study. Based on their English proficiency test, all of them are categorized as low proficiency English learners. They have been studying in an EMI university in Indonesia for one to three years. Before setting up this class, the researcher disseminated a leaflet asking for students in the university who were interested in taking part in the study. The leaflet specifically mentioned that the program was specifically designed for those students who were basic user of English and wanted to improve their speaking skills and were motivated to improve their English proficiency. Ten students voluntarily agreed to participate in this study but in the middle of the data collection two of them were resigned due to their conflicted schedules.

**Table 1.** Participants' Profiles

No	Students' Names	Cohort	TOEIC Score
1	Sinta	2017	403
2	Yesi	2017	350
3	Tyas	2017	315
4	Jerica	2018	550
5	Shafa	2018	570
6	Putri	2017	383
7	Chika	2018	393
8	Mia	2018	340

As a result, only eight students were displayed in the study. Table 1 showed the information regarding the learners' profiles and their English test scores.

Besides the English proficiency test scores, the participants also took part in a pre-speaking test with another lecturer acting as an interviewer. The interviewer is an English teacher who has graduate qualifications from overseas masters in the field of applied linguistics. The test was conducted to understand the extent to which the participants' proficiency in communicating in English and also to predict the material to be taught to them.

After receiving the results from the examiners on the pre-speaking test, it was concluded that the average level of the participants was A2 according to the CEFR, meaning that the learners in this study were basic users who could communicate using basic vocabulary or expressions in English. Therefore, the researcher decided to use the Empower book which contains many communicative tasks and several other supporting materials from the internet.

## 2.2. Task

The tasks consisted of three communicative tasks: 1) Information Gap (Task 1), 2) Role Play (Task 2), and 3) Collaborative Writing (Task 3). The following is an explanation of the implementation of these tasks in the study.

1. Information Gap: In this activity, learners learn how to use the correct form of WH-questions. They were given information about 4 different people where both A / B students filled in the personal information of 2 people whose information was on their partner and they had information from 2 other people that their partner didn't have.
2. Role Play: Meanwhile for the role-play task, the learners learned English expressions for making arrangements to go out. Here the participants were given two information cards where they had to construct two dialogues based on the information, they received without looking at each other's cards.
3. Collaborative writing: for this task, the learners were requested to jointly arrange a party / an event and

afterwards write an informal invitation for their guests. Prior to writing the invitation, the learners were taught some useful expressions and structures of the informal invitation.

## 2.3. Data Collection and Coding

For data collection, the eight participants were paired with other friends so that they formed 4 dyads ( $N = 8$ ). Interaction between participants when they performed communicative tasks was audio-recorded for later being transcribed. Before carrying out the task, the researcher explains to the participants the purpose of the tasks. The participants were instructed to use the target language and might use Indonesian as little as possible if they have difficulty expressing their ideas.

For these meetings, because the school was closed, the researcher and participants made a schedule to meet once a week for 1 to 2 hours using Zoom platform. And, because this is also an additional English program, participants could choose their available time that had been determined by the researcher. Then, after they had selected their time, the researcher then paired up the participants with the one who chose the same schedule. Then on the designated day, the participants and researcher met at Zoom and carried out several pre-activities before the participants carried out the target communicative tasks.

To find out the pattern of how they negotiate for meaning, this study used the NfM categories proposed by Foster and Ohta (2005).

1. Clarification requests are used as clarification moves made by the interlocutor to the speaker's preceding utterances and commonly characterized by expressions such as *What? Huh? Excuse me? Sorry? I don't understand, Pardon?*
2. Confirmation checks are any attempts done by the speaker to get confirmation from the interlocutor that what the speaker understood or heard from the previous utterances was correct. The attempts are usually indicated by rising intonation, all or partial repetitions from previous utterances. "Yeah" is the common response from the interlocutor.
3. Comprehension checks are done to ensure that the interlocutor already understood what the speaker has just mentioned. Do you understand me? Do you follow me? OK? Are you with me? are typically expressed by the speaker.
4. Co-construction is when learners jointly collaborate to construct utterances.
5. Corrections are when either a peer corrects his or her partner or a learner is aware of his/her incorrect utterance and fixes it immediately.

**Table 2.** The frequency and percentage of NfM strategies

Patterns of NfM	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3
Total Number of Utterances	292 (100%)	131 (100%)	351 (100%)
Clarification requests	12 (4%)	7 (5%)	0
Confirmation checks	27 (9%)	8 (3%)	7 (2%)
Comprehension checks	0	0	0
Co-construction	4 (1%)	1 (0.3%)	156 (44%)
Corrections (Self & Peer)	9 (3%)	11 (8%)	13 (4%)

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the NfM strategies that the learners employed in the three communicative tasks. Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage of NfM strategies that learners used when completing the tasks. It can be seen that collaborative writing was the tasks that generated more utterances compared to the other two. This might be due to the nature of the task that requires the learners to jointly write a text and need each other to produce it. The smallest generated turns were found in the role-play task where the number was 131 indicating that the learners produced fewer conversational adjustments. In line with Courtney's (1996) study, in her research on five tasks (information gap, jigsaw, decision-making task, problem-solving, role-play), role-play is the lowest position that results in negotiation of meaning. In this task, the nature of the task was asking the learners to produce dialogues based on the cards without any preparation. Learner proficiency can also have an impact on the number of conversational turns that learners make, especially in this type of task (Storch, 2013).

Similar to the other studies (Lee, 2001; Iwashita, 2001), however, the participants in this study tended to focus more on negotiation of meaning than on form. In completing the tasks, learners made few grammatical modifications. Depend on the tasks, learners made a great deal of NfM in performing information gap and role-play activities. They often requested for meaning/vocabulary clarification from their interlocutors and checked whether the information they had received was correct. One of the reasons why learners seemed to avoid the grammatical errors were likely to their L2 knowledge limitation. They also often

ignored their peers' grammatical errors and use short words or repeat the interlocutors' last words to request for clarification. An example is illustrated in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1.

37. Shafa: Okay, thank you. What is his age?

38. Jerica: He's 13 years old, 13 years old.

39. Shafa: Oh 13...not 30 right?

40. Jerica: 13 yes.

The above example demonstrates that the learner confirmed what she had heard was correct by adding a short word "right?" as well as by rising her intonation to indicate her doubt. This strategy actually tends to be easily ignored. According to Iwashita (2001), the problem with short confirmation checks is "they could be regarded as confirmation of the word, not asking for the meaning of the word, and that kind of question could also be ignored and easily responded to with only yes/no," (p. 278).

The most salient modification strategy used in this study was confirmation check, particularly in the information gap task. When learners did not understand the interlocutors' utterances, they applied confirmation check. In this study, learners usually repeated the whole part of or partially repeat the interlocutors' last words and raised their intonation. The following excerpt demonstrates how the learners check for confirmation.

Excerpt 2.

13. Tyas: Hmmm I can't, Yesi ... I can't go out on Saturday because I have work at the weekend.

14. Yesi: Oh you can't?

15. Tyas: Yeah I can't

16. Yesi: Oh you can't. How about on Sunday? Do you have a free time, Sunday morning?

From the above example, it can be seen that the frequency of negotiation was not that much and the learners tended to provide a very short feedback.

Interestingly, even though learners did not enable to stretch their interlanguage capacity due to their low proficiency, they often provided self-initiated correction. Particularly on the collaborative writing task, the learners were able to notice the errors on their own utterances. Excerpt 3 is the example of self-correction.

Excerpt 3.

46. Sinta: As I...I would...I...as...as...as first...as I...I would to..to see you...I would love to see...I WOULD LOVE...love to see you...to see you.

47. Putri: and then?

48. Sinta: Please let me know if you can...please let me know you can join us.

It can be seen from the example above that Sinta attempted to form the sentence "I would love to see you", which were one of the target expressions in writing the invitation (task 3). Here Putri did not interrupt Sinta who was trying to construct a sentence. Sinta found sufficient time to experiment with language to complete her thoughts. Putri then just replied with "and then?" which indicated that Putri agreed to the sentence Sinta offered. In this case, Sinta has pushed the output because Putri did not provide assistance to perfect or finish Sinta's utterance. In this case it can be seen that the learners take the opportunity to form correct sentences and were not in a hurry to finish their sentences. Even though many of the sentences in the email they created were grammatically wrong, self-correction is a good sign that learners were trying to internalize the target language by searching appropriate words in their minds so that the words can make more sense (Swain & Lapkin, 1998).

The other major finding of the study was the largest co-construction incidents occurred during collaborative writing.

#### Excerpt 4

85. Jerica: Ask them to reply

86. Chika: Yeah...please let me know if you want to come, I think.

87. Jerica: If you can come.

88. Chika: Can come...yeah

In Excerpt 4, the learners showed their willingness to help each other's utterances to construct more meaningful messages. Here we can see how even low proficient learners can negotiate to form the target sentence. Similar to Foster and Ohta's (2005) study, even though conversational modifications did not occur much in the interaction, it does not mean that the tasks did not facilitate the L2 learning. Excerpt 4 informed us that learners assisted each other in order to make meaning which is the main purpose of the interaction.

The role of interaction in the L2 classroom is to provide learners with opportunities to produce output and gain input from their peers. In the study, learners were found to deploy multiple strategies to negotiate meaning.

#### Excerpt 5

25. Sinta: How old Jerry?

26. Mia: Jerry is 48 years old.

27. Sinta: Sorry...pardon?

28. Mia: What?

29. Sinta: Pardon? Eee repeat repeat...

30. Mia: Oh... he is 48 years old

In the example above, the learners negotiated the meaning to be able to attend the same page. During the interaction, when Sinta asked Mia to repeat the number, Mia did not recognize Sinta's utterance "pardon" for clarification (turn 28). Sinta successfully provided another word "repeat" (turn 29) so that Mia understood what information Sinta needed.

The second question is to investigate whether the findings of this study are similar to previous studies on NfM. From the data presented in this study, there are several points that can be juxtaposed with previous theories.

#### 1) Ignored Errors

When learners perform communicative tasks, they are expected to have the opportunity to practice their current L2 knowledge and the target language form, repair their utterances, and assist other learners. However, learners in this study produced a great deal of language errors and also tended to ignore their partner's incorrect utterances and decided to continue with the task. This finding is similar to Lee's (2001) study. However, even though abundant of mispronunciations and structural errors were found in their utterances, they did not impede the interactions. They are more concerned with completing tasks rather than focusing on using language (Storch, 2013).

#### 2) Lack of Comprehension Checks

Although comprehension checks were rarely used, this does not mean that the learners did not benefit from the L2 learning process from the given tasks. "Negotiation for meaning is not a strategy that language learners are predisposed to employ when they encounter gaps in their understanding" (Foster, 1998, p.1) and communicative task may be discouraging for learners (Foster & Ohta, 2005). Therefore, the teaching implication it suggests is that language teachers should be able to create types of tasks that enable learners to express their thoughts, to be a good listener to their peers and feel supportive regardless of their peer's proficiency (Foster & Ohta, 2005).

#### 3) Limited usage of L1

The purpose of pair activity in the L2 classroom is to provide learners with the opportunities to use the target language. This study found that the learners very seldom used their mother tongue when dealing with communication breakdown. In line with Storch and Aldosari's (2013) study, the backgrounds of students might affect the limited usage of the native language. In this research, the learners go to an EMI university where they are used to the English exposure in the classroom. They frequently use the English language during class discussions and task presentations.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

To sum up, it should be noted that the purpose of this study was to analyse the frequency of NfM strategies appeared in the interactions and whether the findings resonate with previous studies. Despite small amount of data gathered, this study supported the results of studies conducted earlier. The low proficient learners in this study tended to use negotiation for meaning in accordance with their linguistic knowledge capacity to accomplish the tasks. Although there was NfM strategy was not used, comprehension checks, they were using other NfM strategies to maximize the language learning. Another pattern found in this study is the multiple strategies used at one time when negotiating meaning. One typical pattern of peer interaction among low-level learners was the use of multiple NfM strategies on one occasion indicating that the learners attempted to internalize the language learning by using multiple strategies to reach comprehension. However, it has to be admitted that this study has many limitations which could be an area of improvement for future research. One of which is the limited number of low proficient participants. Future research can involve a higher number of low proficient participants by incorporating a quantitative study.

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