

Negotiated Communication Strategies (NCSs) Used in an English as a Second Language (ESL) Classroom for Tertiary Education

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Abstract: *The study aimed at identifying negotiated communication strategies (NCSs) used by a Non-Native English-Speaking Teacher (NNEST) and international students from Bangladesh and Vietnam in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class on Speech Communication offered by the University of the Philippines Los Banos (UPLB). Twelve hours of classroom sessions were video/sound recorded, after which, the proceedings were transcribed to allow the identification of the negotiated communication strategies and patterns. The unit of analysis used was the communicative exchanges and interactions between the NNEST (referred to as teacher) and the learners (referred to as students) as they occur in the classroom setting. Analysis of data revealed that to engage in negotiated communication of meanings during classroom interactions, the teacher often used the NCSs clarification, request, confirmation, and comprehension check. Meanwhile, the students negotiate meanings by using the NCSs confirmation, rephrasing, and repetition. Learners and conversation partners continuously negotiate meanings so that incomprehensible or partly incomprehensible input becomes comprehensible. These initiatives led to better understanding of the communication intents of both the teacher and the students.*

Keywords: *negotiated communication, communication strategies, ESL, communicative exchanges*

1.Introduction

During communication between individuals who do not share a common first language, the participants must work together to make the conversation mutually comprehensible. To make inputs comprehensible and provide opportunities for relevant output to occur, the use of communication strategies (CSs) by language learners in small or big groups can allow them to negotiate meanings. This process of negotiating meanings towards communicating a specific idea or message is referred to as negotiated communication. Communication strategies are actually tools used by the teachers and learners of a second language to negotiate meanings.

Generally, CSs refer to a phenomenon that occur in “interactions of interlanguage speakers with others when language learners are able to use their restricted interlanguage in such a way as to transcend its limitations,” (Tarone, 1980). Generally, some of the more commonly mentioned communication strategies used to negotiate meanings include the following: asking for clarification, rephrasing, confirming, restructuring, comprehension check, repair, among others.

When a conversation is taking place between native language speakers or learners of a second language, participants in a conversation work “together to try to reach a grounding criterion” (Clark & Schaefer, 1989). In other words, the speakers and the listeners involved in a conversation “mutually believe that the partners have understood what the contributor meant to a criterion sufficient for current purposes” (Clark & Schaefer, 1989). The contributions that a speaker gives to a conversation “are not formulated autonomously by the speaker according to some prior plan, but emerge as the contributor and partner act collectively” (Clark & Schaefer, 1989). Thus, the overall success of the conversation and the extent to which the participants reach a mutual understanding in meaning through oral discourse depend on the coordinated actions by all of the participants – a negotiation of meanings aided by communication strategies as tools or negotiated communication.

Communicative interaction among non-native English speakers can promote negotiated communication and improve Second Language Acquisition. The potential benefits of meaning negotiation include making input more comprehensible through input modification, eliciting comprehensible output, and providing feedback which forces learners to focus on language form etc. (Smith, 2003). As a result of meaning negotiation, learners will be able to pay attention to the language they produce and modify the language to avoid non-understanding.

It is in this context that the present study is relevant as it attempts to investigate the use of negotiated communication strategies (NCSs) in an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom for tertiary education, leading to a better appreciation of how to make the classroom interactions more effective.

2.Review of Literature

Our understanding of the processes of second language learning has considerably changed in the last 30 years and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is partly a response to these changes. CLT is an approach to language teaching that emphasizes

interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of study (Richards, 2006).

Earlier views of language learning focused primarily on the mastery of grammatical competence. Language learning was viewed as a process of mechanical habit formation. Good habits are formed by having students produce correct sentences and not through making mistakes. Errors were to be avoided through controlled opportunities for production (either written or spoken). By memorizing dialogues and performing drills, the chances of making mistakes were minimized. Learning was very much seen as under the control of the teacher.

Such observation is better theorized by Richards (2006) when he revealed that language learning should be viewed from a different perspective. It is seen as resulting from processes he identified as follows:

- Interaction between learner and users of the language,
- Collaborative creation of meaning,
- Creating meaningful and purposeful interaction through language,
- Negotiation of meaning as the learner and his or her interlocutor arrive at understanding,
- Learning through attending to the feedback learners get when they use the language,
- Paying attention to the language one hears (the input) and trying to incorporate new forms into one's developing communicative competence, and
- Trying out and experimenting with different ways of saying things.

It is in this context that the current study was conducted, taking into account the interactional background in which these strategies were used and/or observed with the possible collaboration of meanings of all the participants.

Negotiated Communication as a Collaborative Activity

In the last few years, new studies have appeared adopting what can be considered as a strict interactional approach to the description of CSs use.

According to the Collaborative Model of Communication, negotiation of meaning is composed of three phases as shown in Figure 1.

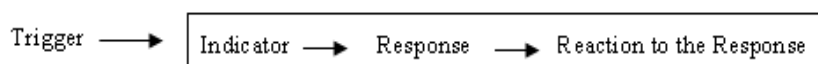


Figure 1. Meaning Negotiation Framework by Varonis and Gass (1985). From "Non- Native/Non-Native Conversations: A Model for Negotiation of Meaning," by E. Varonis and S. Gass, 1985, Applied Linguistics.

Nonunderstanding as triggers, are problematic utterances that cause the negotiation of meaning. Triggers can be lexical/semantic, structural, content, discourse, and pragmatic in nature. Indicators are signals of nonunderstanding, which are either explicit or implicit. Confirmation check and clarification requests are also considered indicators. Responses are utterances by the respondent that replies to a signal of nonunderstanding. Responses can be minimal or elaborative, or modification of the problematic utterances that have caused the nonunderstanding. Reactions to the responses are signals that learners are ready to resume the main line of discourse.

3.Methodology

This study investigated the negotiated communication strategies used by a female Non-Native English-Speaking Teacher (NNEST) and two (2) international students learning English as a Second Language (ESL), as they engaged in the teaching and learning of lessons included in the short course, Speech Communication. The said short course is being offered by the Language Instruction Towards Excellence (LITE) Program, College of Arts and Sciences, University of the Philippines Los Baños. The case study research design was implemented to undertake a more in depth and focused investigation of the negotiated communication strategies in the ESL classroom.

The study was conducted following five (5) major stages, namely:

A. Video and sound recording of the classroom interaction. This was done to document and capture the communication exchanges in the ESL classroom as the participants engaged in the teaching and learning process. The said recorded interactions formed the basic source of data and information for analysis.

B. Verbatim transcription of classroom interactions. The verbatim transcription was done to allow the researcher the following: (1) identify the study's basic unit of analysis, and (2) provide an avenue where a more detailed analysis of the negotiated communication exchanges among the participants can be had.

In this study, the unit of analysis is defined as the communicative exchanges and interactions between the teacher and the international students as they occur in the classroom setting. A communicative exchange or an interaction is taken to be *an uninterrupted sequence of two or more alternating conversational turns* (Fairclough, 2003).

C. Identification of the different sets of interactions which qualified as a unit of analysis, based on Fairclough's (2003) definition. These different sets of interactions were, in turn, the source of the various negotiated communication strategies identified in the study, which could possibly enhance successful communication among the participants.

Later, based on the purpose of the negotiated communication strategies observed, categories or groupings were set, including the following: Describing, Defining, Assessing, and Correct Usage. This was done to find a trend in the communication strategies observed or used based on their communication intent or purpose.

Data Collection Procedures

For each of the three (3) class sessions observed, the Research Assistant verbatimly transcribed the entire length of the conversations recorded. Such transcriptions are necessary to be able to identify specific segments of interactions with negotiated communication techniques observed. The communicative exchanges between the teacher and the international students as they occur in the classroom setting was considered as the unit of analysis.

When the transcriptions were done, interactions were segmented (divided) based on Fairclough's (2003) definition of a unit of analysis. Then, the negotiated communication techniques exhibited by the participants were identified and its frequency of occurrence were noted. A list of possible negotiated communication strategies, based on previous studies, with corresponding definitions and sources, was referred to in the identification

of the observed strategies.

Data Analysis

To determine the most frequently used strategies to negotiate meanings, a simple frequency counting was used.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods of analyses were used to observe what negotiated communication strategies existed in the participants' interaction as they conversed during classroom discussion. Possible reasons for such participant behaviour during negotiated communications were discussed taking into account their personal, educational, and professional backgrounds, including the nature of their relationship with each other.

4.Results and Discussion

The data analysis phase of this project has two (2) parts, namely: (1) analysis of the participants' background information gathered based on the self-administered questionnaire and the interviews conducted to develop their respective profiles, and (2) analysis of the negotiated communication strategies used by each participant as reflected on the recorded segmented classroom interactions.

This paper focuses only on the second part: the analysis of the negotiated communication strategies used in the ESL classroom.

Use and Application of Negotiated Communication Strategies (NCSs) in the ESL Classroom

Negotiated communication strategies (NCSs) often used by the participants were examined. As Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs (1986) reported, we should approach the study of foreign/second language strategic interaction building on the belief that communication of meanings, whether strategic or not, is always a collaborative activity between participants.

Based on the Participants' Use

Considering all the participants in the classroom, the most-often-used NCSs are requesting for clarification and rephrasing (Figure 2). The NCS requesting for clarification is often used probably because the teacher, in her attempt to help the learners, always asked for clarification of the ideas of the learners as contained in their responses; the learners, on the other hand, by their being not so proficient in the use of the English language often asked for clarification to be clear on what they heard or what they said – all these exchanges leading to negotiated communication of meanings.

Based on Putri's (2003) research, he found factors affecting the choice of strategies to use in negotiating for meanings, including the following: learner's attitude, level of learner proficiency, personality; learning situation; and communication context. In the present study, it is likely that the learning circumstance the NNEST is situated played a part in the choices of strategies she used. The NNEST is expected to always ask for clarification (as the teacher in the class) to lead the learner into the correct answer as well as respond or confirm what the learner has offered as a response (whether it is correct or incorrect) in the context of the fact that the learning situations expects her to do those. On the other hand, the learners' top choice to negotiate meanings are confirmation and

rephrasing, which, according to Varonis and Grass (1985) can be considered as indicators suggesting nonunderstanding. It was observed that when the NNEST, in an attempt to complete the conversation, and may be out of impatience because it is taking too long for the students to respond, suggests a possible answer, the students would often respond with, “Yes, Yeah, or Okay.”

Example:

T: So this is what you see?

S: Yeah

T: Coffeemaker?

S: Yeah, because I want to...

T: So, this is an outside... coffeeshop?

S: Yeah.

In this light, one important finding of the study is the need to caution language teachers in volunteering answers to ensure continuous flow of conversations while engaging in negotiated communication in ESL classrooms. While this may encourage the learners to actively participate in the discussions, it can also encourage the learners to simply repeat or mimic the volunteered answers resulting to feigned understanding or not real comprehensibility.

The NCS rephrasing was also often used by all participants of the study either as a way of (1) on the part of the teacher, helping the student better understand the words spoken, and (2) on the part of the students, coping up with the lack of the target word to categorically express their thoughts, thus, the use of some alternative words or phrases were done to negotiate meanings so their responses can be understood.

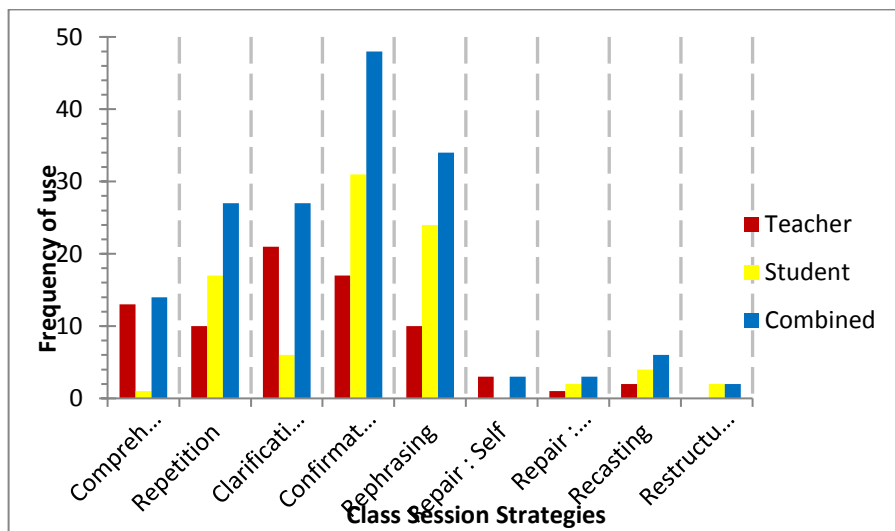


Figure 2. Distribution of participants’ use of negotiated communication strategies

5.Summary and Conclusion

When individuals who do not share a common first language communicate, they must

work together to make the conversation mutually comprehensible. To make input comprehensible and provide opportunities for relevant output to occur, the use of communication strategies (NCSs) by language learners, in small or big groups, allows language learners to negotiate meanings, thereby enhancing successful communication.

The study aimed at identifying NCSs frequently used by the participants of the UPLB-LITE Program's English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. The study also examined how the identified participants' negotiated communication strategies formed into collaborative communications patterns.

Summary

Analysis of data revealed that to be able to negotiate meanings during interactions, the teacher often used the following NCSs in the ESL classroom: clarification request, confirmation, and comprehension check due to the following reasons: (1) to ensure that the prior answers she heard from the student is what the student really meant, giving the student ample chance to explain her/his answer for more chances of negotiating meanings; (2) to provide cues to the student so she can be led to the correct answer; (3) to affirm to the learners the correctness of their answers; and (4) to be assured that the learners understood her discussion of topics.

To be able to negotiate meanings, the learners, on the other hand, often used the following NCSs: confirmation, rephrasing, and repetition. Confirmation (e.g., *Yeah, Okay*) was used by the students as a response to the teacher's query on how she understood the learners' previous question or statement. Rephrasing was used as an alternative to a word or phrase students could not fully explain while repetition of a word or phrase uttered by the teacher proved to be effective strategy to enhance continuous negotiation of meanings.

These NCSs are important tools of the teacher and the students in efficiently and continuously negotiating meanings in the ESL classroom.

The use of varied types of NCSs can only be a manifestation of what Swain (1985) reported as a *process of meaning negotiation where problem utterances are checked, repeated, clarified, or modified in various ways in order to reach the comprehensible input*. Learners and conversation partners continuously negotiate meanings so that incomprehensible or partly incomprehensible input becomes comprehensible. Hopefully, this would lead to enhanced second language acquisition.

Conclusion

The study aimed at identifying negotiated communication strategies used by the participants of the UPLB-LITE Program's English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom.

Results of the study revealed that certain factors affect the participants' choice of strategies to use in negotiating for meanings for a successful communication process, including the following: attitude toward herself/himself, the other participants in the ESL class, and the topic; level of English proficiency, participants' personality and role in the ESL class; learning situation; and communication context. Thus, for a successful negotiated communication to take place, it is important that profiling of all learners should be done and a pre-course proficiency exam be given to all so that teachers would know what classroom lessons and activities are appropriate for a specific group of learners. In addition, such profiling and pre-course proficiency exam can be a guide to

suitable teaching approaches to be used geared toward developing self-confidence among the learners to engage in negotiated communication.

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