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Realization of Communication Tasks in Negotiating Meaning among EFL learners

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Article Info

Abstract

People currently live at a time where the ability to speak English fluently has become a must for those who attempt to advance in certain fields. In classroom context however communication task is considered as a crucial element of English language teaching. As a strategy of communication, negotiation of meaning plays as a process through which the speakers go to clearly comprehend one another. The aims of this study are to analyze the realization of different communication tasks in negotiating meaning and to dig up those tasks in order to explain its impact on negotiation of meaning. A qualitative method is applied in this study where twenty undergraduate students majoring in English Language Education took part in it. The students were paired and assigned to perform five different communication tasks. The result showed that communication tasks had been effectively used as an opportunity for students to elicit the occurrences of negotiation of meaning in interactions. Moreover, it was discovered that each task type yielded different amount of negotiation. Information gap task came out as the most productive task in promoting negotiation of meaning among the other four with some negotiation of meaning strategies employed by students during negotiation; clarification request, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks. In conclusion, engaging students in such communication tasks leading to negotiating meaning helps them in developing their linguistic acknowledgement. It is due to the frequent use of negotiation of meaning strategies can contribute to language development of EFL learners in all level of proficiency.

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INTRODUCTION

Language is considered as the most crucial part in communication. Among the members of a society, it is essentially a means of communication used by them to talk to others in their daily life. Thoughts, emotions, feelings, and desires can be clearly expressed through language (Mulyati, 2013). Its importance has eventually brought many people to learn the International language, which is English as their second language.

It is true that people nowadays live at a time where the ability to fluently speak English, as the second language, has become a must for those who attempt to advance in certain fields (Al-Sibai, 2004). Furthermore, in the process of acquiring second language (L2), both meaningful interactions and natural communications in the target language are required in order to convey and understand massages rather than the form of their utterances.

However, when language (s) being used is/are not speaker's first language, a fairly demanding effort needs to be taken seriously by the speakers in the way communication is conducted (Mujahadah, Rukmini, and Faridi, 2018). As stated by Jiwandono and Rukmini (2015), various strategies and tactics must be employed as the efforts made by them in order to resolve conversational troubles when the communication is disrupted.

In classroom context however many second language learners have attempted and failed or less succeeded in their efforts to master a second language communication skills. Moreover, they highly concern with their primary goal as learning English in order to enable them to communicate fluently in different circumstances with a range of conversation partners whom they might have a higher language ability than the learners themselves. In fact, most of EFL learners are reluctant to keep their interaction going once a communication breakdown occurred during the conversation. They seem to be quiet or not trying to expand their exact meaning further. Nevertheless, there are some strategies that can actually be used by learners in order to deal with communication breakdown. One of them is negotiation, another key role for successful communication. It is the process in which the learners and the interlocutor administer and interpret their utterance which provokes adjustments to linguistic forms, conversational structure or message content so that they can reach mutual understanding (Gass and Mackey, 2006).

Patterson and Trabaldo (2006) added that both interaction and negotiation have successfully attracted special attention as important elements of language acquisitions in SLA. Talking about classroom interaction and communication in English language, although having the grammar and vocabulary resources can help put a sentence together, it is the opportunity to interact and to negotiate meaning that truly promotes language development. As a result, teachers must create opportunity for students so that they can get learning opportunities as individuals. Hence, communication task is considered as an important element of English language teaching. It is defined as tasks which elicit learners to comprehend, produce, or interact in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than form (Nunan, 1989; cited in Ellis, 1997). It can also create opportunities for the language learners to use target language and improve their linguistic competence.

Dealing with communication tasks, teachers usually create small-group activities (conducted with dyadic communicative interactions) seen as beneficial in several ways; it may increase the amount of class time available

to an individual student in order to practice the target language, it can also avoids self-consciousness and anxiety that commonly prevent some students for speaking up in front of the whole class, and it can help in creating a positive and relaxed language learning.

There are some strategies for meaning negotiation used by EFL learners during their interaction including different kind of questions; this study uses those types of feedback defined by Long (1996) for example, confirmation checks (Is this what you mean?), comprehension checks (Do you understand?), or clarification request (Can you say it again, please?). The main purpose is obviously to deliver the message to the interlocutor as clear as possible.

In order to lead to the natural process of negotiation of meaning, various communication tasks must be provided. Moreover, a number of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) studies on interaction has widely argued that engaging in communicative language tasks may help learners in acquiring second language in several ways (Carascalao, Bharati, & Faridi, 2019). Following SLA research tradition, this study analyzes the realization of communication tasks in negotiating meaning and how the tasks make impact on negotiation of meaning. Pica et al (1993) summarizes the most frequently used tasks in the study of interaction into five types of tasks; information gap task, jigsaw task, decision making task, problem solving task, and information exchange (opinion change) task. All the tasks are adopted from a book written by Friederike Klippel entitled *Keep Talking: Communicative fluency activities for language teaching* published by Cambridge university press (1985).

This study attempts to further explore the realization of five different communication tasks used in negotiating meaning. Particularly, this study focuses on the negotiation incidence occured in five different communicative tasks; information gap task, jigsaw task, decision making task, problem solving task, and opinion exchange task. Besides, how the tasks make impact on negotiation of meaning will also be discussed in the present study.

METHOD

A qualitative research was employed for the current study. It was used to investigate and find out the realization of communication tasks in negotiating meaning. This was a qualitative research which used transcription of students' language production gained from negotiation sessions as the main source of data. In addition, this study employed five different communication tasks involving information gap task, jigsaw task, decision making task, problem solving task, and opinion exchange task.

This study focused on undergraduate students as the subject. More specifically, the participants were students of English Language Education Study Program, Department of Language and Art at Universitas PGRI Semarang (UPGRIS). All of the participants were at the fourth semester in the academic year 2018/2019. They were purposefully selected on the basis of their result on 'intensive speaking' subject in the previous semester. The total number of the participants was 20 students. They were then divided into ten groups. Each group consisted of two mixed-ability learners.

In the current study, the object was particularly the language production generated by students during their interaction engaged in five different communication tasks. The tasks were used as the main instrument of the study where the participants performed in the communicative activities. Audio-recorded and transcribed were then applied for the analysis.

There were some methods used by the researcher in collecting the data. First, as communication tasks were the main instrument of the study, the data were gained from the language productions produced by EFL students who were engaged in information gap task, jigsaw task, decision making task, problem solving task, and opinion- exchange task. Second, there were 20 students divided into pairs of mixed abilities to facilitate the discussion or interaction. They received a brief training of negotiation of meaning strategies prior to engaging the five different communication tasks instructions.

Then, students were involved in a series of negotiation of meaning over five different communication task types. Each of which was approximately took less than 15 minutes recording. However, the five tasks were not given at the same day.

After collecting the data, the participants' interactions while carrying out the communication tasks in the form of audio-recording was then transcribed to serve as representation of the details of participants' verbal conduct. Having been recorded, the data were then transcribed and coded for T-I-R-RR (Trigger- Indicator- Response- Reaction to the Response) on the basis of Gass and Varonis (1985) model of negotiation of meaning to measure its incidence.

Moreover, there were some basic steps undertaken in the process of analyzing the data: First, from the students' language production which had been transcribed and coded, the researcher would find out the sequence of meaning negotiation strategies occurred during the interaction. Second, the researcher would classify and identify each stage of negotiation process; trigger- indicator- response- reaction to the response as it had been also used by Luciana (2005) in conducting her research. Then, the researcher would further analyze the feedback (or as Long (1996) calls them "negotiation strategies") such as repetition, comprehension check, confirmation check, and clarification request.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, this research informed about the findings resulted from students' language production in the form of transcription. Basically, this study tried to dig up the realization of five different communication tasks in negotiating meaning and to analyze those five communication tasks in order to explain its impact on negotiation meaning.

By using Gass and Varonis (1985) model, the findings showed that the negotiation of meaning incidence always began with a trigger (T) which gave rise to incomplete understanding on the part of the listener; an indicator (I) which meant the hearer's signal that understanding had not been completed; a response (R) which was the original speaker's attempt to clear up the trouble; and a reaction to response (RR) which might signal the hearer's acceptance or remaining difficulty with the repair. Below was one of the negotiation incidence found in the current study.

127	E:	And then, the picture of the woman um.. read a book.	T
128	F:	Wait, a book? Like novel?	I
129	E:	Um.. I think so. It's like um.. romance novel like that.	R
130	F:	Oh okay, I get it.	RR

Based on the findings, all pairs were generally able to come up with good and flowing negotiation sessions. Analysis of the transcript showed that participants, either high or low proficiency, succeeded in making sure that the conversation continued. They were basically able to produce no isolated utterances even though not all utterances were grammatically correct. This was supported by Rashid (2016) stated that in a conversation involving a group of friends, it is common for the friends to be supportive and take up the topics introduced. Apparently, the current study showed that different task types generated different amounts of interaction and negotiation of meaning. This conformed to the previous study of interaction among L2 learners in EFL settings conducted by Courtney (1996) and Rahmawati, Rukmini, and Sutopo (2014). The realization of each communication task and its incidence were presented below.

The Realization of Information Gap Task in Negotiating Meaning

Information gap is a task that involve conveying or requesting information from the pair or group members (Brown, 2001). Based on the findings, information gap task yielded 591 exchanges from the total ten conversations. There were 84 indicators leading to negotiation of meaning incidence produced by ten pairs of students engaged in the 'picture puzzle' activity. From the 84 indicators, clarification request strategy appeared as the most- frequently used by students. It occurred 44 times in all ten

conversations of information gap task. Confirmation check was as the second most-frequently used strategy which came 30 times. The least strategy found in this type of task was comprehension check which presented 10 times of all ten conversations. This finding is supported by Lee (2001), he stated that several major strategies used by language speakers in dealing with negotiation for meaning include clarification requests, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks. In many studies information gap had been proven to provide the students with a greater opportunity for negotiation. For example, Yufrizal's study (2001) indicated that information gap tasks were more productive than the other two (Jigsaw and role play tasks). "More interaction and negotiations were produced by learners when they were assigned the information gap and jigsaw tasks". Moreover, Futaba (1995) also agreed that information gap tasks generated more negotiations of meaning than Jigsaw tasks.

This might happen because when students were undertaking information gap tasks, the other student who got complete information had to deliver that information to their partners who did not have other access to the information. Here, students who had the complete information were forced to explain it clearly. Thus, the interlocutors were required to request clarification or check their understanding. In this way, Information gap tasks stimulated the participants to produce longer turns and to negotiate meaning more.

The Realization of Jigsaw Task in Negotiating Meaning

Judging from the criteria set up by Pica et al (1993), jigsaw tasks and information gap task have many things in common. In the current study for example, both tasks required the participants to request and supply information. Again, the present study found that the participants used confirmation checks, clarification request, and comprehension check as negotiation of meaning strategies in performing the jigsaw task, particularly in the 'town plan' activity.

Based on the findings, this task produced less number of exchanges compared to information gap task, which was 591 times from all ten conversations. From that number of exchange, 72 indicators leading to negotiation of meaning incidence were produced by ten pairs of students engaged in the 'town plan' activity where clarification request strategy appeared as the most- frequently used with 43 indicators, followed by confirmation check as the second most-frequently used strategy with 27 indicators, and ended by comprehension check which only appeared two times of all ten conversations.

The finding of this study confirmed a part of Courtney's (1996) finding on the rating of five task types. In his study, it was found that the students in Hong kong rated jigsaw task as the second most encouraging task after information gap. Since students had to share information during this jigsaw activity, it was also possible that the participants were benefited from the process of negotiation for meaning in terms of making comprehensible input to their interlocutors during the interaction.

The Realization of Decision Making Task in Negotiating Meaning

As it had been explained in the previous chapter that decision- making task was defined as a task where learners were given a scenario (situation) and were asked to find out the answer to the problem. In this task, both participants had access to the same information and they would end up with making decision of the best answer (s) chosen. In addition to this type of task, a communicative activity called 'NASA Game' was taken by the researcher in conducting this study. Based on the finding, this type of task yielded 579 exchanges with 60 indicators leading to negotiation of meaning. Same as the two previous tasks, clarification requests seemed to be the highest strategy used by students with 37 times, confirmation check appeared as the second position with 20 indicators and comprehension check strategy were found three times in all ten conversations.

This result however came out as the least production of negotiation of meaning compared

to the two previous tasks; information gap task and jigsaw task. In fact, decision making task could produce high exchanges yet with less production of negotiation meaning. A study conducted by Brown (1991) supported this finding. He analyzed three decision making tasks in three small groups of students. He concluded that the number of clarification request, comprehension checks, and confirmation checks were considerably lower than 24 per cent noted by Pica and Doughty (1986) in other types of communication tasks; information gap and jigsaw. This indicated that decision making task was not providing as rich as an opportunity for negotiation of meaning as one might wish.

Further, Yufrizal (2001) pointed out that both information gap task and jigsaw task were different from the decision making (in the form of role-play) task especially in the goal orientation and the outcome options. He added that in both information gap task and jigsaw task, the participants had the same or convergent goals and a single outcome was expected from task completion while in the decision making task the participants could have different goals and more than one outcomes were expected from its completion. Thus, it could be said that information gap task and jigsaw task differed slightly from each other, but these two tasks were expected to differ significantly from the decision making task.

The Realization of Problem Solving Task in Negotiating Meaning

The finding of this study showed that problem solving task did not seem to lead too much on negotiating meaning. Based on the data analysis, out of 667 exchanges produced by students engaged in problem- solving activity, only 43 indicators were found in leading to negotiation of meaning where clarification request appeared only 24 times and 19 times for confirmation check. It could be seen that this type of task discovered only two types of negotiation strategies such as clarification request and confirmation check. A comprehension check strategy was not found in all ten conversations.

This might be due to the students' ability in inferring what meaning was carried by the speaker. Even though they did not fully understand the whole message, they could eventually use the non-verbal language to help modify their linguistic knowledge. This finding also indicated that decision making interaction did not trigger more negotiation. This was supported by Choi (2012), stated that task types differently influenced the learning of the two linguistic targets; the one-way information gap task was more effective for learners in the short term than was the decision-making task.

The Realization of Opinion Exchange Task in Negotiating Meaning

Based on the data analysis, opinion exchange task generated the highest exchanges among the other four tasks; information gap task, jigsaw task, decision making task, and problem solving task. 720 exchanges was found in all ten conversations done by students engaged in the 'Guide' activity which was by far as the most productive task. However, only two negotiation strategies were discovered from this task; clarification request and confirmation check. Yet, the finding showed that confirmation check strategy was produced by students in dealing with some communication breakdown quite often. It appeared 35 times even though the clarification request strategy was slightly higher with 36 times.

In this type of task, it seemed that students would be strongly encouraged to talk when a confirmation check took place. This might be due to the opportunity received by learners to be engaged in discussion and exchange of ideas during this task. This then stimulated students to interact and negotiate more in the conversation (Fernández-García and Martinez-Arbelaiz, 2002). Eventually, this had confirmed that the role of negotiation for meaning was very obvious in a second language environment.

The Impact of the Five Communication Tasks on Negotiation of Meaning

In the present study, EFL learners had to perform five different communication tasks; information gap task, jigsaw task, decision making task, problem solving task, and opinion exchange task. To come up with an answer to the sixth research question, the researcher tried to dig up more about the incidence of negotiation of meaning production found in every task. From the transcription of students' language production, it could be seen that each task yielded different numbers of exchanges as well as the negotiation of meaning occurrence. The table below explained the incidence of negotiation of meaning in all ten conversations engaged in five different communication tasks.

Table 1. Explained the incidence of negotiation of meaning in all ten conversations engaged in five different communication tasks

Type of Communication Tasks	Total Exchanges	Negotiation of Meaning Strategies		
		Clarification Request	Confirmation Check	Comprehension Check
Information Gap	591	44	30	10
Jigsaw	539	43	27	2
Decision Making	579	37	20	3
Problem Solving	667	24	19	-
Opinion Exchange	720	36	35	-

According to the table above, it was indicated that communication tasks had clearly promoted the incidence of negotiation of meaning which was believed by many researchers as by the five different communication tasks which then benefitted students in learning a second language, especially in face to face communication. It was obviously true that a task played important roles in facilitating language acquisition process as it contributed as one variable that affected negotiation of meaning. The finding showed that the five different communication tasks were able to stimulate negotiation of meaning. Above all, communication tasks had been found by the researcher to generate more opportunities for the students to negotiate. It was also considered good for them to practice more negotiations in their interaction as a communication strategy that clarified meaning to facilitate comprehensible messages.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The conclusion was presented according to the data which had been analyzed in the previous units. From all the data analyses about the realization of communication tasks in negotiating meaning, the research was concluded as follows:

This present study revealed that communication tasks had been effectively used to elicit the occurrences of negotiation of meaning in interactions. Referring to the finding of the research, communication tasks provided an opportunity for learners in negotiating meaning. It was shown that every task type yielded different amount of meaning negotiation. This had confirmed that the role of negotiation for meaning was very obvious in a second language environment.

The findings indicated that information gap tasks came out as the productive task in promoting negotiation of meaning among the other four. It was also found that more interaction

and negotiations were produced by learners when they were assigned the information gap, jigsaw tasks, and opinion exchange task. The current study also revealed that information gap provided learners with more opportunities to produce more complex utterances. In sum, it was argued that information gap was a type of task that was most productive yet provided the most opportunities for negotiation of meaning.

The finding also displayed some negotiation of meaning strategies employed by students such as clarification request, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks. Nevertheless, clarification request appeared as negotiation strategy that was most-frequently used by students in each type of communication tasks. It was obvious that the students used those strategies to help them in conveying and negotiating meaning. In conclusion, engaging students in such communication tasks leading to negotiating meaning effectively helped them in developing their linguistic acknowledgement. It was due to the frequent use of negotiation of meaning strategies might contribute to language development of EFL learners in all level of proficiency.

Considering the benefits that students might get during negotiation of meaning process, it was strongly suggested that teachers should encourage their students to negotiate for meaning during L2 interactions so that positive development in the target language could be accelerated. Therefore, learners should be provided with tasks that encouraged them to perform as language users and as natural speakers as possible.

However, there were several suggestions related to this research such as it could become an additional reference to the existence of communication tasks in regard with negotiation of meaning in real communication. Bringing the above ideas within the classroom framework, it was necessary for teachers to use various communication tasks and implemented communicative activities that promoted negotiation of meaning which was able to support comprehensible output and input. Therefore, it was suggested that teachers provide more

opportunities for learners to interact with each other in the classroom.

The current study however only focused on analyzing the realization of communication tasks in negotiating meaning regarding to five different tasks summarized by Pica (1993) and three negotiation strategies; clarification request, confirmation check, and comprehension check defined by Long (1996), Pica, and Daughty (1985). Besides that, this study only focused on the interaction among EFL learners in classroom context. Thus, for other researchers, there were still many other types of tasks which could be used to promote natural interaction in negotiating meanings. They could analyze the one-way or two ways communication task and many others. Also, further researchers might also conduct a research in a more natural interaction such as the way people negotiate and interact in their daily interaction or English debate conversation instead of classroom interaction. Those perhaps would be a crucial topic to be investigated for further studies in the field of second language acquisition. In short, 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 or native to non-native learners.

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