

Training Learners to Negotiate for Meaning: An Exploratory Case Study

Akiko Fujii, Motoko Obata, Sayo Takahashi, and Sayaka Tanabe
International Christian University

This paper reports on an exploratory case study investigating the possibility of training second language learners to be effective interlocutors in second language learning tasks. The study followed a pre-test, instruction, post-test design. Four learners completed a picture difference task, then received instruction on negotiation for meaning, and finally completed a different version of the picture difference task. Learners also participated in stimulated recall sessions at each stage of the experiment and completed a questionnaire at the end. Findings suggest that learners are receptive to instruction on negotiation, that such instruction has the potential to enrich the quantity and quality of negotiation between learners, and that instruction on negotiation for meaning may also enhance learners' motivation for learning.

Second language learners often engage in *negotiation for meaning* with their instructors or with their peers while carrying out second language learning activities (or tasks). By negotiation for meaning, we refer to “a process in which a listener requests message clarification and confirmation and a speaker follows up these requests, often through repeating, elaboration, or simplifying the original message” (Pica, 1994, p.497). The tools learners and instructors use in negotiating for meaning include discourse strategies such as repetitions, confirmation checks, clarification requests, and reformulations or recasts.

Example (1)

- A: Between the line?
B: Between the line? What do you mean? ← *clarification question*
A: I have just
B: OK
A: I have just two line or bars ← *modification of “line” to “bars”*
B: Yes, between the bars. ← *indication of successful communication*

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An excerpt from the data for the current study (Example 1) shows how clarification questions and reformulations may be employed during learner-learner interaction to overcome a communication breakdown and achieve mutual understanding.

Researchers such as Long (1996, 2007), Pica (1994), Gass (1997), and Mackey (2007) have argued that negotiation for meaning contributes to second language learning in a number of crucial ways. First, negotiation often provides learners with modified or more comprehensible input and also pushes learners to produce output that is comprehensible to their interlocutor. Furthermore, learners often reformulate or modify their non target-like utterances in response to interactional feedback moves such as clarification requests, confirmation checks, and recasts. This process of repairing communicating breakdowns often draws learners' attention to linguistic form, and may specifically trigger learners' "noticing" of mismatches between their own interlanguage and the target-like forms of their interlocutors. In his Interaction Hypothesis, Long (1996) proposed that "negotiation for meaning, and especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the NS or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways" (p. 452).

A vast body of empirical studies have been conducted to date that confirm that negotiation or specific components of negotiation do lead to second language learning of lexical items (e.g., Ellis & He, 1999; Ellis, Tanaka, & Yamazaki, 1994) as well as morphosyntactic aspects of language (e.g., Han, 2002; Iwashita, 2003; Mackey, 1999, 2006a; Mackey & Oliver, 2002; McDonough, 2005). Studies have been conducted with both children and adult learners in both laboratory and classroom settings, and in second language and foreign language learning settings targeting the acquisition of languages such as English, Spanish, Japanese, and Korean (see Mackey, 2007 for comprehensive review). In terms of practical implications for the language classroom, such research suggests that learners may benefit from instructional materials such as communicative activities that create opportunities for negotiation.

In order to further pursue the pedagogical implications of the benefits of negotiation, numerous studies in the area of interaction research have addressed questions such as whether or not learners actually engage in negotiation for meaning in the classroom (e.g., Foster, 1998; Gass, Mackey, & Ross-Feldman, 2005; Loewen, 2005), whether or not negotiation occurs in learner-learner interaction (as opposed to learner-instructor or learner-native speaker interaction) (e.g., Adams, 2007; Fujii & Mackey, in press), and whether or not negotiation for meaning results in second language development in classroom contexts (Loewen, 2005) and in negotiation between learners (Adams, 2007).

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Many such studies have concluded that negotiation does occur in second language classrooms during learner-learner interaction (e.g. Gass, Mackey, & Ross-Feldman, 2005), and that second language learning does result from such instances of negotiation (Loewen, 2005). However, Foster (1998) and Fujii and Mackey (in press) have also reported the relatively infrequent occurrence of negotiation episodes, either due to the specific classroom context of their studies or specific task materials. Furthermore, Lyster and Ranta (1997) have pointed out that even when learners engage in negotiation for meaning and are provided with interactional feedback, they may not notice the feedback or perceive the feedback in the way it was intended. An experimental study by Mackey, Gass, and McDonough (2000) demonstrated that this may indeed be the case for at least a portion of the feedback provided to learners by their interlocutors.

In sum, the research to date shows that negotiation for meaning can facilitate second language learning, that negotiation for meaning can occur in the classroom in interactions between learners and their instructor as well as between learners, and that such form-focused episodes can lead to second language development. However, there may be variation in the quantity, quality, and effectiveness of negotiation that actually occurs in the classroom due to contextual or other factors. If negotiation for meaning is to be a reliable and effective component of second language teaching methodology, more research is needed in this area to understand how teachers can create the context for negotiation to work effectively on a consistent basis.

An interesting avenue for further investigation was described by Mackey (2006b). Mackey (2006b) suggested that much of the research to date has been based on the notion that learners are “passive consumers of the task or the feedback that teachers or interlocutors provide” (pp. 375-6), and proposed that there may be ways to help learners take a more active role in the learning process, for instance, by “raising learners’ expectations or sensitivity to interaction” (p. 376). In other words, it may be worthwhile to focus on the role of the learner in creating and taking full advantage of an optimal learning environment. Through instruction, it may be possible to nurture the skills and metacognitive awareness that learners need to be both effective interlocutors and effective learners. It is this line of thought that was pursued in the current study.

The current study explored the possibility of training learners to be more effective learners and interlocutors, focusing specifically on the process of negotiation for meaning in second language learning tasks. The following research question was addressed: Can negotiation training enhance the quantity and quality of negotiation during learner-learner interactions? A case study of four learners was conducted to explore this question.

Method

Participants

The participants for the current study were four female learners of English enrolled in a private university in Tokyo, Japan. Two participants (Pair 1) were in their third year of study at the university, and two participants (Pair 2) were in their second year of study. Their English proficiency had been categorized as “high intermediate” (mean TOEFL score =504) based on an in-house placement test during their first year at university.

Materials

An interactive picture difference task was developed for the study. One learner was given Picture A, which showed the original version of a comic strip, while another learner was given the Picture B, which showed the same comic strip with some parts of the illustration missing. The task was for the learners to communicate about the cartoon strip so that the learner with Picture B could complete the missing portions of the illustration. Two versions of the task were created; one for use as a pre-test before the instructional training session on negotiation and one for use as a post-test after the instructional training session.

A questionnaire was developed for the study that consisted of 11 questions and space to comment freely on the experiment (see Appendix A). Slightly modified versions of the questionnaires were given to learners who described the complete cartoon and learners who filled in the illustration.

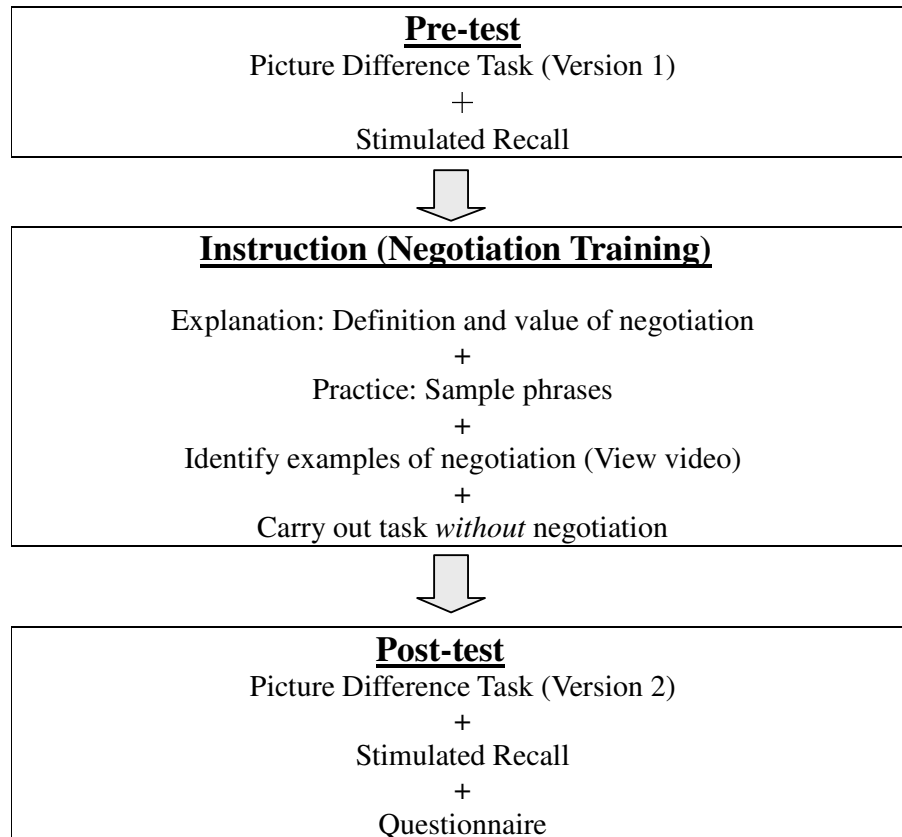
Procedure

The study followed a pre-test, instruction, post-test design as shown in Figure 1. Each pair first carried out the picture difference task followed by a stimulated recall session (Gass & Mackey, 2000) during which learners viewed the video-recording of their task and were asked to recall what they had been thinking at the time of the task. Then, each pair participated in an instructional training session, which is explained in more detail below. Immediately following the instructional training session, each pair completed a different version of the picture difference task. Finally, learners participated in a second stimulated recall session and responded to a questionnaire. Learners were given 10 minutes to complete the tasks. The tasks were video-recorded, and the stimulated recall sessions were audio-recorded. Data was collected for each pair separately and the procedure took about 60 minutes per pair. The instruction session combined

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presentation by the researchers and hands-on activities involving the learners, and followed the outline presented in Table 1.

Figure 1. Procedure



The session began with an explanation of the definition of negotiation, and then presented learners with examples of negotiation moves and sample responses, which learners practiced aloud. These examples were taken from the textbook learners used in their first year English speaking course (Hemmert & O’Connell, 1998). Then learners were asked to identify instances of negotiation by viewing a video recording of themselves carrying out the picture difference task. This was followed by an explanation of how negotiation contributes to second language learning. Finally learners carried out the picture difference task again but were instructed to try to avoid engaging in any kind of negotiation. This final step was intended to highlight for learners the value of negotiation by experiencing its absence. It was hypothesized that refraining from negotiation would make learners conscious of a “desire” or “need” for learners to negotiate.

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Explanations were given primarily in the learners' native language, Japanese. Learners were also provided with a handout.

Table 1. Overview of instructional training session on negotiation

<u>Outline</u>	<u>Description of each component</u>
1. Presentation: Definition	Definition of negotiation from Pica (1994) was explained.
2. Presentation and Elicited Repetition: Negotiation Moves	Examples of negotiation moves were presented, including (1) asking for a definition (e.g. What does _____ mean?), (2) checking spelling, pronunciation, or grammar (e.g. How do you spell that?, (3) asking for repetition (e.g. Could you repeat that?, Could you speak more slowly?), and (4) paraphrasing to confirm meaning (e.g. Do you mean _____ ?).
3. Presentation and Elicited Repetition: Responses	Examples of responses to negotiation moves were presented, including (1) repeating, (2) adjusting syntax, (3) changing words, (4) modifying forms and meanings,(5) increase or reduce the length of utterances.
4. Activity: Identify negotiation	Instances of negotiation were identified while viewing a video recording of the pre-test.
5. Presentation: Theory	Explanation was provided of the roles of explicit and implicit feedback along with a diagram showing the relationship between negotiation, attention to form, and second language learning.
6. Activity: No negotiation	Picture difference task was carried out again, but without any negotiation.

Analysis

Language produced by the learners during the picture difference tasks was transcribed by one of the authors and checked by a second author. The transcripts were then coded for instances of negotiation. Negotiation was defined according to Pica (1994) as “a process in which a listener requests message clarification and confirmation and a speaker follows up these requests, often through repeating, elaboration, or simplifying the original message” (p.497). Indications that a speaker was requesting message clarification or confirmation were counted by identifying (1) clarification requests, (2) confirmation checks, or (3) comprehension checks and also identifying responses to such negotiation moves. Examples of each type of negotiation

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signal are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Types of negotiation moves

<u>Signal type</u>	<u>Example (signal is indicated in italics)</u>
Clarification request	A: He is sitting and around his face, at the bottom of his face, he is tied by some cloth. B: <i>um?</i> A: so that he cannot speak B: Ah I see
Confirmation check	A: Is that all? At the center of the picture, there is a boy. B: <i>boy? Is this a boy?</i> A: Yeah. And he is sitting.
Comprehension check	A: right side of his head? B: Yeah. <i>Does it make sense?</i> A: Yeah.

Data was coded by three of the authors. Any differences were resolved through discussion. The stimulated recall sessions were also transcribed. Data was analyzed both through quantification and through qualitative examination. Translations of the data were made by the first author. Due to technical problems, data was not available for the second stimulated recall carried out by Pair 1.

Findings

The research question, “Can negotiation training enhance the quantity and quality of negotiation during learner-learner interactions?” was addressed through comparing the number of negotiation moves before and after training. Tables 3 and 4 display the number of confirmation checks, clarification requests, comprehension checks, and responses during the picture difference task before and after the instructional training session for each pair.

Table 3. Number of negotiation moves used by Pair 1

<u>Negotiation move</u>	<u>Before training</u>	<u>After training</u>
Confirmation checks	2	1

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Clarification requests	0	1
Comprehension checks	0	0
Responses	1	2

Table 4. Number of negotiation moves used by Pair 2

<u>Negotiation move</u>	<u>Before training</u>	<u>After training</u>
Confirmation checks	3	4
Clarification requests	0	4
Comprehension checks	0	3
Responses	2	9

Although there is no great difference in the number of confirmation checks before and after training, there was some indication of a greater variety of negotiation moves used during the task following the training session. Interestingly, for example, is the emergence of clarification requests in both pairs after the training session. Examples 2 and 3 show that in at least two instances learners were able to explicitly articulate their requests for clarification using questions such “What do you mean?” (Pair 1) and “What did you say?” (Pair 2).

Example (2)

A: Between the line?

B: Between the line? *What do you mean?*

A: I have just.

B: OK.

Example (3)

A: Hands are around his body, like this. We cannot see the right hand.

B: *What did you say?*

A: I cannot see his right arm because it is behind his body. Is that all?

In the case of Pair 2, the post-training task was also characterized by the emergence of comprehension checks, such as “Does it make sense?” and “Do you have any questions?” The emergence of clarification requests and comprehension checks resulted in greater total instances of negotiation moves for Pair 2. In summary, findings suggest that the quantity and quality of negotiation was enhanced after learners participated in the training session.

Discussion

The findings above suggest that instructional training on negotiation had some impact on the quantity and quality of negotiation during learners' task-based interaction. Learners' responses to the questionnaire and comments elicited during the stimulated recall session add support to this claim and provide further insight into how the training session may have affected learners.

First, both learners from Pair 2 made comments that appear to support the benefits of the training session. One learner wrote on her questionnaire, "After listening to the explanation of negotiation, I think I was consciously able to use more negotiation ... That might be why the second task went more smoothly," and the other learner wrote, "At first I was not sure how to ask questions, but during the task following the training session, I was actively able to use negotiation and it was easier to ask questions." Furthermore, in responding to the questionnaire on a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), all four learners answered either "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" to the question "Were you able to communicate more smoothly with your partner after the training session compared to before the training session?" In addition, all four learners answered "Strongly Agree" to the question "Did you consciously try to engage in negotiation more after the training session?," indicating that the instructional training session may have been effective in raising learners' awareness about negotiation.

However, one learner from Pair 1 wrote on her questionnaire, "I was not able to use what I learned in the training but I remember it so I think it will be very useful," implying that she had not immediately been able to apply what she had learned. This comment indicates that the same training session may not have had the same benefits for all four learners. It may be that modifications to the content of the training session (i.e. more time spent on practice or conducting training over a longer term), or to the tasks (i.e. using more complex tasks or grammar focused tasks) would however further enhance the effectiveness of the training session for more learners.

It may also be that ongoing or long-term training as well as more opportunity for practice are necessary to ensure that training is beneficial. Introspective comments made by learners in Pair 2 during the stimulated recall sessions after both the pre-test and the post-test suggest an emerging state of competence in negotiating for meaning. After the pre-test, the learner who described the complete comic strip reported, "I wondered how to say window frame" and also that "I didn't know what you did and did not understand." Yet, such uncertainties were not explicitly articulated during the task. After the post-test, the same learner also commented on the difficulty of explaining that

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the figure in the picture had a bandana knotted around his head. In this case, however, there was corresponding evidence during the task that the learner actively had tried to check her partner's comprehension during the task by saying "Does this make sense?" Still, she expressed her dissatisfaction with their interaction, saying to her partner during the stimulated recall session, "You have to tell me what you understand and what you don't understand," and indicating that her partner needed to be more active in negotiating for meaning. This episode conveys the dynamic nature of the learning process, showing that negotiation training may stimulate learners to then further "train" each other, and thus grow together as more effective interlocutors.

Finally, several comments revealed unexpected benefits of the training session on learners' motivation for second language learning. One learner in Pair 1 wrote on her questionnaire "I made mistakes or felt my English was insufficient. But instead of getting discouraged, I could find out what I needed to improve and think positively that I want to improve my English so that I can communicate more effectively." The same learner also wrote "We cooperated to complete the task and by helping each other with vocabulary, we could learn and also have fun." These comments show that awareness and understanding of the role of negotiation in language learning may help learners to understand and accept the value of errors or miscommunications. These are aspects of interaction which some learners may initially perceive as discouraging. Thus instruction on negotiation may help learners to hold a more positive attitude towards language learning in the communicative classroom .

Limitations and Directions for Further Research

Because this case study was limited to only four learners and one task, the findings cannot be generalized to a larger population. It should also be noted that the study was conducted within a specific EFL context, in a laboratory rather than a classroom context. Importantly, the study was short-term, conducted in one single data collection session, and did not employ any measures of second language learning, thereby preventing any speculation about the effects of negotiation training on second language learning over time. Still, the findings do provide some basis for suggesting directions for future research in this area. Needless to say, the next logical step is to conduct larger-scale studies over longer periods of time that examine the relationship between negotiation training, and second language acquisition of specific grammatical structures or lexical items. Furthermore, it would be interesting to examine the effect of negotiation training on learners' attention to and awareness of language during interaction. In addition, future research should also include a focus on

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recasts, a form of interactional feedback that has been shown to be effective in a wide range of second language acquisition studies (see Long, 2007). Recasts were not included in the instruction session for the current study in that provision of recasts between learners may be face-threatening, thus requiring confidence as well as a certain level of proficiency on the part of the learners. However, research that seeks ways to overcome such challenges may have crucial implications for the second language classroom.

Finally, the current study was limited to examining only one method of training. Still, it may be worthwhile to report that learners' evaluation of this particular training session was positive. Most interestingly, all four learners commented on the effectiveness of carrying out the task *without* negotiation during the instructional session. For example, learners wrote comments such as "By carrying out the task once with negotiation and once without, I could realize the importance of negotiation in communication," and "When I carried out the task without negotiation, communication did not go very well and it was very difficult. I realized that I determine whether I am being understood through my partner's reactions or negotiation moves." It would be interesting to develop and compare alternate methods of training learners to be effective interlocutors. Such work can help to give learners valuable learning tools with which to take control of their learning both within the classroom and through conversational interaction beyond the classroom.

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APPENDIX A

タスクやトレーニングを通して感じたことについてお答えください。

全体を通して		と も 思 う	思 う	思 わ な い	全 く 思 わ な い	
1	「negotiation」とはどんなものか、理解できましたか。	5	4	3	2	1
2	「negotiation」を理解するのに、トレーニングでの説明は適切・十分でしたか。	5	4	3	2	1
3	トレーニングの後、自分の「negotiation」の能力は向上したと思いますか。	5	4	3	2	1
4	トレーニングの後、「negotiation」を意識的にするようになりましたか。	5	4	3	2	1
5	トレーニングの前よりも後のほうが、パートナーとの意思疎通がうまくできたと思いますか。	5	4	3	2	1
6	「negotiation」を用いることによって、パートナーとの情報交換が効果的に行えたと思いますか。	5	4	3	2	1
実際にタスクをしてみて感じたことに基づいてお答えください						
7	「negotiation」なしのタスクで、パートナーに説明するのに難しさを感じましたか。	5	4	3	2	1
8	「negotiation」を用いることによって、人との意思疎通がよりし易くなると思いますか。	5	4	3	2	1
9	「negotiation」をした・されたことにより、自分の英語の曖昧さ・間違いなどに気づき、正そうと思いましたか	5	4	3	2	1
	(9に関して)具体的にはどのようなことをされましたか。また、どのように発話に反映させましたか(例：繰り返しを求められたので、分かりやすい言い換えた)					

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10	「negotiation」のやりとりの中で、新しい表現に気づいたり、学んだりしましたか。	5	4	3	2	1
11	「negotiation」をされて、不安になったり、自分の発話に自信がなくなったりするようなことはありましたか。	5	4	3	2	1