

# Some Insights from Negotiation Theory

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One of the problems of English education in Japan is that although students obtain extensive grammar knowledge, they will hardly be able to become successful communicators. In spite of 6-10 years of English instruction at school, most Japanese not only have a lot of difficulty in comprehending input, but also difficulty in making their output understood. *Negotiation* is adjustment which learners and their interlocutors make in order to increase the comprehensibility of the message. It has been one of the major issues in language learning and the language acquisition field presently—however, it does not seem to have obtained sufficient recognition in the English education in Japan. With its practicality, negotiation would be a key factor in facilitating classroom interaction. This paper tries to review the historical and developmental background of negotiation theory (section 1), define its domain (section 2), describe its two aspects (section 3) and components of each of them (sections 4 and 5), draw out some insights from negotiation theory (section 6) and discuss their implications to activate English classrooms in Japan (section 7).

## 1. Historical and developmental background of negotiation

### 1.1. Foreigner Talk

Ferguson (1971) has observed simplified speech of a NS (native speaker) to a NNS (non-native speaker) interlocutor who has very limited knowledge of the language and termed it “Foreigner Talk (FT).” The majority of the FT is characterized as ungrammatical, and it is said to be the product of three main processes: omission, expansion and replacement/rearrangement. Omission involves deletion of articles, prepositions, subject pronouns, etc. (eg. “He live three year Japan”); expansion typically involves lexical tags to questions (eg. “..., yes?/no?/okay?”); and replacement/rearrangement involves substituting noun-plus-object pronoun structures for possessive pronoun-plus-noun structures (eg. “sister me” for “my sister”), forming negatives with no plus the negated item (eg. “Me no like”), etc. Later, some research introduced that there are grammatical versions of FT as well; arranging the sentences shorter and less complex within the scope of grammaticality (eg. avoiding less frequent words; containing fewer sentences, clauses, relative clauses, etc. per T-unit). The main focus of FT studies at the beginning was input, but it was gradually shifted to the structural features of the conversation between NS and NNS—this study is called “foreigner talk discourse”—and explored by researchers like Hatch and Long (Long, 1983).

### 1.2. Hatch’s first step in negotiation

Since Hatch (1978a, 1978b) insisted on the necessity of focusing more on the nature of the

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learning process in second language acquisition, the importance of interaction has gained much attention in the field of language learning. She insisted that the point of view in language learning research at that time—paying attention to how L2 structure learning is linked with the learners' communicative use of L2—should be shifted to examining how the learning of L2 structure results from communicative use. Many researchers followed Hatch's view, and a specific type of interaction was named negotiation (Pica, 1994).

### 1.3. Long's interactional modification

Long's investigation into conversational discourse of NS and NNS (Long, 1983) revealed that NS and NNS try to avoid and repair breakdowns in ongoing conversation. In the beginning, he referred to these adjustments as *interactional modification*, but later not only he but also other researchers began to call it *negotiation* (Pica, 1994).

### 1.4. Is input simply enough for acquisition?

Krashen's *Input Hypothesis* (1982, 1985) led many researchers to attempt to find better ways to determine "i+1" level of input: the input with optimal difficulty level for the learners, neither too difficult nor too easy. Krashen (1982, 1985) claimed the importance of this "i+1" level of input on the basis that for second language learning to take place, exposure to comprehensible input is both necessary and sufficient.

The experiment of French immersion programs in Canada revealed that even with extensive exposure to communicative input, fossilization (i.e., a situation which progress in learners' L2 system seems to stabilize at a certain stage) in many aspects of grammar and lexis was observed among the students. From this outcome arose the question of whether input alone is sufficient for language acquisition (Mitchell & Miles, 1998).

Swain (1985) claimed in her *Comprehensible Output Hypothesis* that the acquisition of new syntactic structures is more likely to be achieved from learners' attempts at L2 production, than simply from the struggle to comprehend i+1 level utterances.

Thus, originally, negotiation referred mainly to the way of speaking which helps the learners to understand L2 input which is not comprehensible to them. The way to make the learners' output more comprehensible to the interlocutors has also come to be regarded as another aspect of negotiation (Pica et al., 1989).

## 2. Definition of negotiation

*Negotiation* is characterized by the interaction which modifies or restructures the difficulties in comprehending a message. Learners and their interlocutors can achieve the comprehensibility necessary for mutual understanding through linguistic adjustments such as repetition, replacing a word, or modifying a form, etc. Varonis and Gass (1985) refer to these "difficulties in message comprehension" as "non-understanding," and define them as "those exchanges in which there is some overt indication that understanding between participants has not been complete" (Varonis and Gass 1985 : 73). To sum up, negotiation is the adjustment which the speaker and the interlocutor make in order to adjust the focus of the message which contains some unclarity.

### 3. Negotiation of meaning/negotiation of form

Negotiation of meaning involves comprehensibility of the message, but negotiation of form also requires accuracy and preciseness in its form (Lyster, 1997). Lyster & Ranta (1997) directed their attention to the functional aspects: they described that negotiation of meaning has a conversational function and negotiation of form has a didactic function. They define negotiation of form as “the provision of corrective feedback that encourages self-repair involving accuracy and precision and not merely comprehensibility, which is in keeping with Swain’s notion of comprehensible output” (Lyster & Ranta 1997 : 42).

Pica (1994) identifies three conditions of negotiation in second language acquisition—learners’ comprehension of L2 input, their production of modified output, and their attention to L2 form. While negotiation of meaning can be applied to both input and output, negotiation of form is considered within the frame of corrective feedback—that is, to correct the form of learners’ output.

### 4. Components of negotiation of meaning (Pica, 1994 ; Long, 1983)

4. 1. Comprehension checks: remarks that speakers make to evaluate if they are succeeding in communicating with their interlocutors (eg. “Do you understand?” “Do you know X?”).
4. 2. Clarification requests: remarks to ask their interlocutors for additional information (eg. “What do you mean by X?”).
4. 3. Confirmation checks: remarks to make sure if they are understanding the right thing that their interlocutors are trying to tell (eg. “X?”).
4. 4. Strategies/tactics: broader categories of comprehension checks, clarification requests and confirmation checks, with strategies being attempts on discourse repair after a breakdown in communication, tactics being attempts at avoiding such a breakdown.
4. 5. Signals: the term for listener utterances in response to a trigger utterance from the speaker. Used instead of clarification requests, confirmation checks—Varonis and Gass (1985) referred to these two as “indicators.”

Following these features which listener requests, the speaker responds through repetition, elaboration, or simplification of the original message.

### 5. Components of negotiation of form (Lyster, 1998a, 1998b; Lyster and Ranta, 1997)

5. 1. Explicit correction: teacher clearly states that what the student had uttered was not correct and provides the correct form (eg. “You should say…,” “Oh, you mean…”).
5. 2. Recast: teacher overtly reformulate all or part of the student’s utterance.
5. 3. Elicitation: teacher tries to elicit a self-reformulation from students with a question such as “How do you say that in English?” or by pausing to allow them some time to complete teacher’s utterance.
5. 4. Metalinguistic clues: teacher indirectly indicates that there is an error somewhere in the student’s utterance using the phrases like “Can you find your error?” or “No, not X.”
5. 5. Clarification requests: teacher signals their non-understanding of the student’s utterances using phrases like “Pardon?” or “I don’t understand.” This is a type of feedback which can be

find to signal the problems in both comprehensibility and accuracy.

- 5.6. Repetition: with intonation highlighting the error, teacher repeats the student's utterance which contains incorrect form.

As Lyster's categorization is based on teacher-student relationship, "teacher" can well be substituted by NS and "student" by NNS in the aforementioned description. In Lyster (1998a), he further narrows the term "negotiation of form" as 4 feedback types: namely, elicitation, metalinguistic clues, clarification requests, and repetition of error—excluding recasts and explicit correction because of their low rate of learners' uptake<sup>1</sup> and not functioning as facilitator of peer- and self-repair.

## **6. Insights obtained from negotiation theory**

### **6.1. NS-NNS negotiation**

#### **6.1.1. Input**

Scarcella & Higa (1981) found that adult NSs provided input with less complexity to younger learners (aged 8.5 to 9.5 years old) than to older learners (aged 18-21 years old). They also found that when talking to NSs, older NNS learners used more negotiation work to sustain the conversation. They concluded that with this active negotiation work, the older learners received the input which was more "optimal" than that which the younger learners received. It may be assumed that ability to fine-tune the meaning of conversation develops according to age; or maybe older learners were able to transfer their ability already developed in their L1 system to L2 system.

Pica et al. (1987) compared the listening comprehension of NNS under two input conditions: premodified input, which the researchers modified linguistically the original lecturette using more repetitions and less complex structures; and interactionally modified input, which used the unmodified lecturette but NNSs were given opportunities to negotiate with NSs about it. The results showed that negotiated input was by far better in assisting comprehension. A further classroom observation connected with this study suggested that even when learners only witnessed their classmates negotiating to comprehend the directions, it improved the comprehension of themselves as well. Pica et al. identified repetition and rephrasing of the directions as the significant factors in NNS's comprehension. This research showed that "interaction" has a crucial role in adjusting appropriate difficulty level—premodified input was only an one-way provision, not giving any opportunities for the learners to adjust their understanding level.

Ehrlich et al. (1989) suggested from their analysis of discourse that a "skeletonizing" strategy (i.e., a strategy which the speaker provides minimal detail) is more likely to lead to greater learning. On the contrary, they pointed out that the "embroidering" strategy (i.e., a strategy which the speaker provides greater explanation) can lead to both listeners' confusion and speakers' failure in producing comprehensible input. Embroidering techniques may have made it difficult for the listeners to localize the point of non-understanding.

#### **6.1.2. Output**

Swain (1985) maintained the indispensability of learner production attempt to be successful in conveying comprehensible output. Van Lier (1988) insisted that teachers should wait to use corrective feedback which deprive the speaker of their opportunity to do self-repair—supposedly an

important learning activity. Chaudron (1988) argued that instruction emphasizing self-repair was more likely to assist learners' monitoring ability in their target language speech. These suggestions view spontaneous involvement of learners as an essential factor in language acquisition.

Pica et al. (1989) tried to identify how L2 learners responded linguistically when NSs signaled difficulty in understanding them and compared the differences in learners' responses according to different communication tasks. They found out that NS signal type had a strong effect on NNS's response type: when NSs signaled explicit necessity for clarification rather than providing model utterance for confirmation, NNSs had a tendency to modify their output most frequently. This may support the claim that passive participation in interaction—only saying yes or no in response to their interlocutors' signals—does not offer enough opportunity to try out the learners' interlanguage hypothesis.

The relationship between corrective feedback type and learner uptake has been a field widely explored recently. Ellis (1995) concluded that negative evidence<sup>2</sup>, particularly that with recasts, strongly promotes L2 syntactic ability. Lyster and Ranta (1997) argued that among six different feedback types used by four teachers, recasts had a surprisingly high tendency of being used irrespective of their ineffectiveness at promoting student-generated repair. On the other hand, elicitation, metalinguistic feedback, clarification requests, and repetition elicited student-generated repair.

Spada (1997) suggested that in communicatively based or content-based L2 classrooms, an explicit focus seemed to be effective in particular. Mackey and Philp (1998) found that interaction with intensive recasts was more effective than interaction without recasts for advanced learners. Lyster (1998b) found that young learners didn't seem to realize the majority of recasts as negative evidence. Methods most effective may vary according to learners' linguistic level, age, and furthermore, error types. I intend to review this area carefully on another occasion.

## 6.2. NNS-NNS negotiation

Since most of the research so far has been findings in ESL situations or in immersion classrooms, research of interaction between NNSs is quite limited.

Varonis and Gass (1985) fixed their eyes upon a distinctive features of interaction between NNSs. They hypothesized that in the NNS-NNS conversations, NNSs are more willing to respond to other-repairs from their NNS interlocutor without feeling embarrassed because of a "shared incompetence" between them. They not only found out that NNS-NNS pairs spent more time on negotiation than NS-NS or NS-NNS pairs, but also speakers of different languages and with different proficiency levels had the most to negotiate. They concluded that shared incompetence plays a great role in sustaining the conversation while the interlocutors negotiate meaning. Further verification of this suggestion in empirical study will be beneficial especially for those countries in which English is instructed as a foreign language, not as a second language, where most English instructors are NNSs.

## 7. Implications for English classes in Japan

One of the problems pointed out in the present situation in Japan is that English classes are

instructed mostly in Japanese—resulting in the students obtaining a great amount of knowledge of grammar, but they will hardly be able to be successful communicators. This can be easily attributed to insufficient input of English in classrooms. Negotiation theory can help English instructors in Japan to construct their classes solely in English: instructors can learn how to increase the comprehensibility of their input. Moreover, both instructors and students can learn how to “signal” whenever they have difficulty in understanding the meaning which their interlocutors provided. In a sense, what lacks in present English classrooms in Japan may be interaction itself. A lot of instructors have already noticed this, and are trying to organize classes which are more communicatively active. To be able to foster proficient communicators, instructors themselves necessarily have to be proficient communicators. Provision of effective teacher training and establishment of strict standards for the proficiency level of instructors is sure to become one of the matters requiring attention in the near future.

When introducing negotiation into classrooms, negotiation of meaning should be incorporated into classrooms before negotiation of form. But we must also give a serious thought to the next step beyond comprehension—how to promote learners’ intake and the ability to make comprehensible output by the learners themselves. Starting with Swain (1985)’s claim, many researchers have argued the indispensability of learners’ active output attempts. However, as Japanese students are considered to be reserved, making them speak out may be tough work per se. Various suggestions exhibited by corrective feedback research will aid instructors in finding a way to facilitate their students’ utterances.

Suggestions from Varonis and Gass (1985) that negotiation between NNSs can produce a less threatening atmosphere for the learners to speak implies learners might be more willing to speak to NNS teachers than they were to speak to NS teachers. We must also take into account the special atmosphere of Japanese classrooms that the teacher–student relationship is not always as casual as that of foreign countries. However, a suggestion that “NSs myth”—a strong belief that NSs are always the best teachers to teach English—may not be applicable all the time will encourage Japanese instructors of English to make greater efforts to improve their teaching skills. Also, as English is not a native nor official language in Japan, it is very difficult to rely totally on native speakers for English instruction. What is realistic and realizable is to train as many teachers with superior communicating ability as possible.

Negotiation theory can be introduced both to in-service and prospective instructors to obtain more effective techniques for activating classroom interactions. Furthermore, it can be of great use for the learners as well, when fine-tuning comprehensibility of the input they receive and the output they produce. I strongly believe that negotiation theory will be one of the key factors for betterment of English education in Japan in a short time.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In Lyster and Ranta (1997), they provide two types of student uptake: (a) uptake that results in “repair” of the error on which the feedback focused and (b) uptake that results in an utterances that still needs repair. Here, it is used with the former context.

<sup>2</sup> Negative evidence informs learners what is not acceptable in the target language. It can be provided by two ways

—preemptively and reactively. Reactive negative evidence elicits gaps between the target language and a learner's output, which is frequently referred to negative feedback (NF).

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