The Position of Strategy and Speakers’ Positive Attitudes

Keywords: task-based language teaching, negotiation of meaning, second language acquisition

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1. Introduction

Tasks are thought to be important in English teaching because they are believed to foster interaction between learners, increase opportunities for negotiating meaning, and promote second language acquisition (SLA). However, in typical English teaching in Japanese schools, textbooks activities do not include sufficient interactional learning in the target language. Therefore, teachers should adopt the task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach in order to increase the amount of interaction between learners. Considering the above situation in school education, it is necessary to research TBLT.

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that the position of strategies in the negotiation of meaning changes depending on the speaker’s intention and that identifying this position enables raters to evaluate the speaker’s positive attitude toward communication in the target language. This study assigned learners in a senior high school to complete a task in pairs using a TBLT approach. Discourses, including the negotiation of meaning generated through interaction, were transcribed from sound data to text data and analysed.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Defining a ‘task’

Based on Japan’s EFL context, how can ‘task’ be appropriately defined for designing pair work in this study? The definition of this term has already been considered in Iio (2011, p. 27). Ellis’s (2003, p. 16) definition plays a primary role in the present study because it encompasses all of the essential factors by combining several researchers’ ideas. For the purpose of concisely describing the definition of ‘task’, the present paper adopts Lee’s (2000, p. 32) approach, as he itemizes the definition into a list of individual factors. Nunan (1989, p. 10) also clearly defines what learners should do in a task and thus should also be included in this paper’s definition. In addition, Skehan’s (1996, p. 38) definition clearly shows how to assess learners’ task performance, and thus this relevant factor should also be included. The definition composed of the main ideas of these four researchers must cover all necessary factors to appropriately define a task. Moreover, the completed definition must be effective as a standard with which to validate whether the activity to be conducted is truly a task. Based on the above conditions, we can produce the following definition.

1) A task is a communicative activity in a classroom.
2) Learners comprehend, manipulate, produce, or interact in the target language.
3) Learners’ attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form.
4) The task content has multiple characteristics.
   a) The task has a relationship to the real world.
   b) The task involves an objective that is only obtainable through interaction among participants.
5) The design of the task itself
   a) includes a mechanism for structuring and sequencing the interaction and
   b) predisposes learners to choose particular forms.
6) The task can engage any of the four language skills.
7) Task performance is assessed in terms of task outcome.
   (Ellis, 2003, p. 16; Lio, 2011, p. 27)

2.2 Describing the negotiation of meaning

The negotiation of meaning consists of utterances by interlocutors; therefore, in the process of dialogue, some structural elements of the negotiation exist. Varonis and Gass (1985, p. 73) proposed four functional primes: a trigger (T), an indicator (I), a response (R), and a reaction to response (RR). These four primes are broadly divided into two categories; concretely speaking, the first half is a trigger, and the latter half is the resolution. That is to say, a trigger initiates the negotiation of meaning, and then some means is adopted with which to resolve the problem. The first part is only a trigger, and the latter part consists of an indicator, a response, and a reaction to a response as shown in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trigger</th>
<th>Resolution</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>I → R → RR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My father now is retired</td>
<td>retire? yes oh yeah</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1. A model of the negotiation of meaning (on the basis of Varonis & Gass, 1985, p. 74)*

Examples of strategies for the negotiation of meaning include the following (Ellis, 2003, p. 71).

1) Comprehension checks — any expression designed to establish whether the speaker’s own preceding utterance has been understood by the addressee, for example, ‘I was really chuffed. Know what I mean?’
2) Clarification requests — any expression that elicits clarification of the preceding utterance, for example, ‘Uh?’
3) Confirmation checks — any expression immediately following the preceding speaker’s utterance intended to confirm that the utterance was understood or heard correctly, for example,
   X: I was really chuffed.
   Y: You were pleased?
4) Recast — defined as an utterance that rephrases an utterance ‘by changing one or more of its sentence components (subject, verb, or object) while still referring to its central meanings’, for example,
   X: I go to cinema at weekend.
   Y: You went to the cinema. What did you see?

Ellis (2003, p. 257) also describes another four explicit techniques as strategies in the negotiation
of meaning.

5) Explicit correction — a task participant draws explicit attention to another participant’s deviant use of a linguistic form, for example, ‘Not x but y.’

6) Metalingual comment/question — a task participant uses metalanguage to draw attention to another participant’s deviant use of a linguistic form, for example, ‘Past tense not present tense.’

7) Query — A task participant asks a question about a specific linguistic form that has arisen in performing the task, for example, ‘Why is "can" used here?’

8) Advice — a task participant (usually the teacher) advises or warns about the use of a specific linguistic form, for example, ‘Remember you need to use past tense.’

In describing strategies for negotiation, this paper italicizes the words or phrases in which the strategy is used. In addition, an equal sign fixes the position of the strategy, providing its name. Table 1 provides abbreviations of strategies for the negotiation of meaning.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension check</td>
<td>CmC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarification request</td>
<td>CR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmation check</td>
<td>CFC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recast</td>
<td>Rct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit correction</td>
<td>EC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metalingual comment/question</td>
<td>MC/Q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Query</td>
<td>Qry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice</td>
<td>Adc</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Ito, 2013, p. 109)

To describe discourse in this paper, a left-pointing arrow is used to locate the functional primes of negotiation of meaning (Kitajima, 2009, p. 149), and an equal sign is used to locate and identify the strategy. This distinctive use of arrows and equal signs is intended to make a clear distinction between the functional primes and the strategies.

Based on the findings from the prior literature, the following research question is established.

Can speakers’ positive attitudes be evaluated by determining the positions of their strategies for the negotiation of meaning?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

In this study’s lesson, the participants were enrolled in an English course in a prefectural high school. The number of students in the class totalled 41, but the 28 who chose a language laboratory seminar (LL seminar) were participants in the study. These 28 students, including four returnees, were second-year students when the data were collected but are now third-year students. On the whole, the participants had a high level of interest in learning English, and all had previously participated in a three-week English-learning programme in Australia. The programme was planned by the high school’s English department, and the contents of this study lesson served
as a follow-up to the program. Additionally, the participants’ goal was to communicate their
experiences in Australia in the target language.

Regarding the participants’ academic abilities, specifically English language proficiency, all 41
class members underwent TOEIC Institutional Program Tests. The average score of the students in
the class was 331 points in the first year of senior high school and 421 points in the second year.

3.2 Data collection

The task design of pair work in the study lesson was as follows. The 28 students in the LL
seminar were grouped into 14 pairs for the lesson and conducted role-playing interviews. One
student in each dyad played the role of interviewer and asked his or her partner about learning
English in Australia, and the other student played the role of interviewee and answered the
questions. The lesson was conducted as a class on September 16, 2011, and the lesson duration
was 50 minutes.

One interview session continued for four minutes, and when it came to an end, the members of
the dyad switched roles of interviewer and interviewee and conducted the same interview again.
During the lesson’s 50 minutes, the learners changed partners twice; thus, each participant had 3
different partners, each with 15 minutes of pair work. During the interview sessions, all 14 dyads
recorded their utterances with an IC recorder.

For the dyad sessions to run smoothly, this study’s lesson provided activity sheets to the
learners and showed them how to change partners during the 50 minutes. Table 2 shows that
portion of the activity sheet.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The procedure for pair-work interview sessions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st session (15 min.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd session (15 min.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd session (15 min.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The activity sheet also included the interview items for the learners to conduct pair work by
themselves, as shown below.

1) How was your home stay in Australia?
2) Did you enjoy learning English at B¹ University?
3) Where did you go with your host family?
4) Did you have any troubles during your stay in Australia?
5) What was the most exciting experience during your stay in Australia?
6) Do you have anything else to say about your stay in Australia?

One of the main purposes of this pair-work task was to generate as much negotiation of
meaning as possible during the interaction; accordingly, the learners were given the following
three instructions to maintain negotiation once it began in the dyad.

1) When one individual in the pair says a word or a phrase that cannot be understood, the
other should ask the first speaker what it means. The pair should focus on maintaining
their communication successfully.
2) Use of Japanese language is strictly forbidden during the interview sessions for the benefit of continuing to speak English. When a speaker would like to learn a word or a phrase from the partner, that speaker should use expressions such as ‘How should I say ( ) in English?’ or ‘What is the word for ( ) in English?’

3) The student in the interviewer role should comment on the partner’s answers and/or ask further questions in addition to the assigned questions.

4. Data analysis and considerations

4.1 An example of the negotiation of meaning

Following the study lesson, this paper verified from the sound data whether any negotiation of meaning occurred during the pair work. The number of discourses that were investigated as subjects of this study was 84. Among them, four discourses included negotiation of meaning during the pair-work task. This paper examines one of those discourses. The following utterances occurred between Student A, who was an NNS with experience living abroad for two months, and Student B, who was a returnee with experience living in the U.S. for five years.

DISCOURSE 1

A: I went to three markets.
B: Different?
A: Yes.
B: What did they sell there? ← T1
A: 'Ha? ← I1 = CR
B: What, what did they SELL there? ← R1
A: Sell. Ah. Ah. ← RR1
There was food, sweet, and clothes. I bought doughnut.
B: Ah, doughnut. Er, was it hand-made? ← T2
A: Yes. Young boy (pause) sold? ← I2 = ?
B: Sold. ← R2
A: Ah, sold. ← RR2
B: Sold. Heh.

In Discourse 1, Student B asks, ‘What did they sell there?’, which functions as a trigger (T1). After listening, Student A does not understand the meaning of the question and expresses her non-understanding by saying ‘Ha?’, which functions as an indicator (I1). In this case, the strategy for negotiation of meaning is a clarification request. Then, Student B believes that her partner may be unable to understand the word ‘sell’ and repeats it slowly and loudly, making it recognizable, which is a response (R1). Next, Student A grasps the word ‘SELL’ and repeats it. Immediately following, she shows that she understands her partner by repeating ‘ah’ twice, which functions as a reaction to response (RR1). Thus, the negotiation of meaning in Discourse 1 follows the procedure of four functional primes: ‘T1→I1→R1→RR1’. Here, Student A uses the clarification request as the strategy for negotiation of meaning, and its position is located at the indicator (I1).

This paper also analyses how the second negotiation of meaning, namely, ‘T2→I2→R2→RR2’, progresses in the discourse. Student B asks her partner a question such as ‘Er, was it hand-made?’
which becomes a trigger (T2) in the negotiation. Replying to the question, Student A first says ‘Yes’ and continues talking and says ‘Young boy (pause) sold?’ Student A fails to properly use the past tense ‘sold’ in her utterance. Instead, she uses ‘selled’. When she makes this utterance, she is vaguely aware that ‘selled’ is an incorrect word form. For that reason, the intonation when Student A utters ‘selled’ is rising, as though she is implicitly requesting confirmation from her partner with regard to whether ‘selled’ is grammatically correct. Therefore, this utterance made by Student A is an indicator of trying to begin the negotiation; that is, it functions not only as an indicator (I2) but also as a strategy for negotiation of meaning.

Meeting her partner’s request for confirmation, Student B utters ‘Sold’, with the intention of telling her partner that the correct word-form is ‘sold’, which becomes a response (R2). Student A then shows that she understands the correct word-form by saying ‘Ah, sold’, which becomes a reaction to response (RR2). Student B then repeats the word ‘Sold’ and recognizes her partner’s modified output. When Student B says the word, her tone of voice conveys the idea “That’s right. Not ‘selled’ but ‘sold’. You are correct.” Up until this utterance, Student B pays attention to form; subsequently, she begins to focus on meaning again and expresses her mild surprise by saying ‘Heh’, responding to what her partner intended to say, namely, ‘Young boy sold’.

This paper further considers the position of the strategy for negotiation. At the indicator (I2) in Discourse 1, Student A utters ‘Young boy (pause) sold?’ with a rising intonation. If her remark was uttered as ‘Young boy selled’, with a falling intonation, and if she did not request confirmation, the analysis of the negotiation of meaning would change. Discourse 2 is fictitious.

DISCOURSE 2

B: Ah, doughnut. Er, was it hand-made? ← T3
A: Yes.
    Young boy selled. ← I3
B: Sold. ← R3 = Rct
A: Ah, sold. ← RR3
B: Sold. Heh.

(This example extracts the second negotiation in Discourse 1 and changes some portions to create a fictitious dialogue.)

Similar to Discourse 1, the utterance made by Student B (‘Er, was it hand-made?’) plays the role of trigger (T3) in Discourse 2. Answering the question, Student A says, ‘Young boy selled’, which plays the role of indicator (I3). In this case, Student A does not notice that the underlined ‘selled’ is grammatically incorrect; consequently, the intonation of ‘selled’ at the end of her utterance is falling. Student B then says ‘Sold’ with the intent to correct her partner’s wrong word-form ‘selled’, which plays the role of response (R3). This response is a recast strategy in the negotiation of meaning, or, conversely, among the four functional primes, the strategy’s position is located at the response. After R3, Student A says ‘Ah, sold’ and shows that she understood the correct word-form with her partner’s assistance, which plays the role of reaction to response (RR3). At the end of Discourse 2, Student B repeats the word ‘Sold’ again and recognizes her partner’s modified output.

As stated above, in Discourse 2, Student A does not notice the grammatical mistake ‘selled’ at the indicator (I3). With the intention of correcting Student A’s ‘selled’, Student B says ‘Sold’ at the
response (R3), which is a strategy of recasting but is not what actually occurred.

In actuality, Student A is vaguely aware of her own error in grammar when she says ‘Young boy (pause) sold?’ at the indicator (I2) in Discourse 1. At that time, Student A requests confirmation of whether ‘sold’ is correct by raising the intonation at the end of her utterance. Therefore, it is appropriate to say that the indicator (I2) by Student A is the position of the strategy for negotiation. In this way, a speaker’s intention and tone of voice can shift the position of the strategy for negotiation of meaning. The following question then arises: why does this shift happen? In other words, why is the position of the strategy in Discourse 1 located at the indicator, whereas in Discourse 2, it is at the response?

4.2 The position of the strategy for negotiation of meaning

Student A is one of the top-ranked learners in the LL seminar and takes a serious approach to learning English. There is a strong possibility that she has already learnt the past form of ‘sell’. Nevertheless, she did not use the word ‘sold’ in the discourse. However, it seems reasonable to suppose that she was close to properly using ‘sold’. At such a place in her progress, Student A appears to try hard to positively identify the correct expression through negotiation of meaning. Comparing Discourses 1 and 2, when one of the two interlocutors feels the need to negotiate and uses the strategy of requesting assistance from the partner, the position of the strategy shifts from the response to the indicator. In other words, the positive attitude towards communication moves the position of the strategy from the response to the indicator when the speaker begins a negotiation asking for assistance from his or her partner.

If that is the case, what does the position of the strategy being located at the indicator imply when the negotiation is analysed? This position provides analysts with a basis for judgment regarding the speaker’s positiveness toward communication. This judgment is not based on subjective impressions, such as facial expressions or manners of speaking but is based on the objective contents of the speaker’s utterances.

What must be considered next is the name of the strategy adopted by Student A when she says ‘Young boy (pause) sold?’ at I2 in Discourse 1. The strategy is different from the other eight strategies included in Table 1, which presents previous studies’ strategies for negotiation of meaning. As stated previously, Student A requests confirmation of whether ‘sold’ is a correct word-form by saying ‘Young boy (pause) sold?’ with rising intonation. Therefore, it can be said that the confirmation request, which is denoted by CRN in this paper, is an appropriate name for the strategy. This strategy is not used for checking the meaning of a partner’s utterance, i.e., it is different from a confirmation check strategy. Instead, this strategy is used to begin the negotiation of meaning positively with the aim of acquiring the target language. This strategy seems to fall into a category under which NNS students use strategies to eagerly begin the negotiation of meaning.

After Student A conducted the pair-work interview task with Student B, she participated in three other sessions but did not have the opportunity to use the word ‘sell’ or ‘sold’ again. Nonetheless, the negotiation of meaning between Students A and B in Discourse 1 should be beneficial to Student A’s SLA, as we can expect Student A to use the word ‘sell’ or ‘sold’ correctly in the future. This analysis of Discourse 1 provides a concrete example of how the task of pair work generates negotiation of meaning between learners and is beneficial to their SLA.

5. Conclusion

The research question in this study is the following.
Can speakers’ positive attitudes be evaluated by determining the positions of their strategies for the negotiation of meaning?

The result of analysing the discourses in the study lesson revealed that the position of strategy in the negotiation of meaning shifts with the speaker’s intention and that identifying the position enables raters to evaluate the speaker’s positive attitude toward communicating in the target language. This study appears to answer the research question in the affirmative.

6. Suggestions for further study

There are two primary challenges that future research should address. One is that future research should examine many more examples of negotiation of meaning, analyze how learners use the negotiation techniques, and clarify how language items are acquired. Moreover, comparing and analyzing these techniques may lead to clarifying the mechanism of second language item acquisition during or after conversation. This comparison and analysis could also clarify the phases of learners’ cognitive item acquisition or the effects of the techniques on item acquisition in cooperative learning interactions.

In addition to the above, the second aim that should be addressed in future research would be how to design tasks and what teachers should do during tasks to increase the frequency of learners’ acquisition of language items through the negotiation of meaning. For this aim, the researcher should design tasks specifically to increase the negotiations of meaning that encourage item acquisition. Thus, investigating and designing this type of task will be the purpose of the next study, for which the basic components of the task design for this thesis can continue to be used just as they are. If this purpose is achieved successfully, the next study should contribute further to the field of English language teaching.

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Notes
1 For reasons of anonymity, this paper refers to the university as ‘B University’.

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