Can Meaning Negotiation Work with English Language Learners in the Writing Center?

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of the Collaborative and Interaction Theories on second language learners in the writing centers. It also supports the notion that when English language learners meet with writing consultants to negotiate meaning when analyzing their texts, they gain proficiency in the target language. Meaning negotiation is going to be understood as the interaction that takes place between speakers when some misconstruction occurs. In addition, it provides an overview of research studies of the role of meaning negotiation in promoting opportunities for language acquisition, which imply a change in the way language learning and teaching are addressed.

Key words: Interaction Theories, Collaborative Theories, Output and Input Hypotheses, pre-modified or interactionally modified input, meaning negotiation

Resumen

Este artículo explora el impacto de las Teorías de Colaboración e Interacción en los estudiantes de una segunda lengua en los centros de escritura. Además, apoya la noción de que cuando estos estudiantes se reúnen con los asesores de escritura para negociar significados en el análisis de sus textos, ellos adquieren algún grado de competencia en el idioma meta. La negociación de significados va a ser entendida como la interacción que ocurre entre hablantes cuando surge algún malentendido. Asimismo, este artículo presenta una visión general de investigaciones sobre el papel de la negociación de significados en promover oportunidades para la adquisición de una lengua, las cuales suponen un cambio en la manera en que se tratan el aprendizaje y la enseñanza de un idioma.

Palabras claves: Teorías de la Interacción, Teorías de la Colaboración, hipótesis del Output y del Input, input pre-modificado o modificado en la interacción, negociación de significados

How do the theory and pedagogy of collaboration in writing centers fit the needs of English language learners? Several writers (Matsuda & Cox, 2004; Silva, 1997; Harris 1997) point out the need to provide English language learners with strategies that do not rely on intuition on the English language that they have not developed or may not develop. For instance, the reading aloud strategy that works very well for native speakers of English may not work with non-native speakers of English. They cannot intuitively detect an error, for instance in word choice, if they have not reached a high level of proficiency in the English language.

The lack of proficiency in the English language is what mainly makes the English language learners look for help in writing centers. How can writing centers best help English language learners? How can the theory and pedagogy of collaboration suit the needs of these students? I strongly believe that when English language learners meet with writing consultants to negotiate meaning while analyzing their texts, they gain proficiency in the target language. My position is supported by research in second language acquisition that asserts the significance of meaning negotiation in the learning process of a second or foreign language. Let me review two main theories that have influenced the teaching and learning processes of a second language: the Input Hypothesis and the Interaction Hypothesis.

After Krashen (1983) proposed his Input Hypothesis, which states that "we acquire (not learn) language by understanding input that is a little beyond our current level of (acquired) competence" (as cited in Johnson, 2001, p. 92), many theorists (Gregg, 1984; Higgs, 1985; McLaughlin, 1984; and Brown, 1984) have criticized this notion stating among other things that this is an oversimplified explanation of the complex process of language acquisition. Besides, they argue that Krashen's hypothesis lacks explanatory power of basic concepts such as learning, acquisition, and comprehensible input. In spite of considerable criticism to his theory, the field of second language acquisition acknowledges the importance of comprehensible input in the learning process of second or foreign language learning, but it also acknowledges that comprehensible input is not enough for the acquisition of a language. So, it has also directed efforts towards more research on the analysis of output and interaction.

Merrill Swain proposed her Output Hypothesis based on the idea that "understanding language and producing language are different skills, and that the second can only be developed by pushing the learner to produce output—actually to say and write things" (as cited in Johnson, 2001, p. 95). I agree with this assumption in the sense that I have encountered several students who are able to read and understand, for example, a text in English but who are unable to speak or to write in this language. However, both terms are important to visualize the complex process of language acquisition.

One way to reconcile these two hypotheses is through "the Interaction Hypothesis." This hypothesis states that when the learner interacts with other learners or the teacher, he/she receives input and produces output. It claims that "it is in the interaction process that acquisition occurs: learners acquire through

talking with others" (Ibid). In other words, interaction propitiates opportunities for acquisition to take place. And this is possible through meaning negotiation in these interactions.

This hypothesis is attributed to Michael H. Long, who affirms that

> negotiation, and especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the NS or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capabilities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways. (as cited in Nakahama, Tyler, & Van Lier, 2001, p. 379)

Since the emergence of this hypothesis, research studies (Goldstein, L. M. & Conrad, S. M., 1990; Pica et. al, 1996; Long, M. H. & Porter, P. A., 1985; Ellis, R. & He, X., 1999) have focused on the influence of negotiation of meaning in the process of language acquisition.

In 1997, Rod Ellis defined negotiation of meaning as "the interactive work that takes place between speakers when some misunderstanding occurs" (as cited by Johnson, 2001, p. 95). The learner uses several strategies when interacting with others in order to understand and to be understood. Clarification requests, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks are some of these strategies, for "these features of negotiation portray a process in which a listener requests message clarification and confirmation and a speaker follows up these requests, often through repeating, elaborating, or simplifying the original message" (Pica, 1994, p. 493). In addition, these features take place in interaction between native speakers with native speakers, native speakers with non-native speakers, and non-native speakers with non-native speakers. In her article *Research on Negotiation: What Does It Reveal About Second-Language Learning Conditions, Processes, and Outcomes?* Teresa Pica cites the excerpt from research done by Larsen-Freeman & Long in 1991 with native speakers and non-native speakers. This excerpt illustrates some of these negotiation features:

> Excerpt
> NNS: But uh but uh . . we take we take a break . .
> NS: oh
> NNS: You know thirty minutes
> NS: oh
> NNS: Break time
> NS: oh good
> NNS: thirty minutes
> NS: *At ten thirty you take a break?*
> NNS: Thirty minutes
> NS: *Right <u>When</u> do you take the break? At ten thirty?*
> NNS: Uhm. ten fifteen
> NS: *Ten fifteen*
> NNS: ten fifteen From the fifteen to ten fifty-five

> NS: Ten <u>forty-</u>five
> NNS: Ah, ten f-forty-five
> NS: Right right Have you seen Los Angeles? (pp. 498-499)

This excerpt is an exemplification of how the native speaker and non-native speaker negotiate to achieve successful communication. There are several expressions of the non-native speaker and the native speaker, like *uh but uh . . . thirty minute. . .ten <u>forty-five</u>*, etc., that signal clarification requests.

There is no doubt about the relevance of negotiation of meaning in order to achieve a successful communication, but in what way does negotiation of meaning contribute to language acquisition? To answer this question, it is important to look at some theory of learning in second language acquisition. First, acquisition of a language cannot take place without comprehension and internalization of L2 linguistic and sociolinguistic features of the target language. However, it is important to point out that comprehension can take place without internalization: those learners who can understand a written text but cannot produce the language are an example. Swain noted that "to produce an utterance that can be understood often requires specific morphology and syntax to convey its meaning" (as cited in Pica, 1994, p. 501). In this sense output generation is important for acquisition to take place.

Second, studies on second language acquisition show that "attention to L2 form is needed as learners attempt to process meaningful input . . .and attempt to master structural features that are difficult to learn inductively because they are relatively imperceptible in L2 input or overlap with structures in the learner's L1" (Ibid). This implies that the ESL/EFL teacher needs to get a balance in the teaching of form and function. The best way to do this, from my point of view, is to give students syntactical, morphological, or phonological explanations of the target language accompanied with activities that reinforce these forms and promote interaction between learners who need to produce these forms.

Third, salience of L2 input can greatly contribute to students' learning process. According to Pica (1994), "of particular benefit is input that provides information to help learners identify which forms can occur in the L2 and which cannot" (p. 502). In this respect, feedback is essential to achieve awareness. However, this cannot occur without students' production or output and without the conversational act. In this context, writing conferences are the ideal setting for this to take place, and it goes hand in hand with writing centers' collaborative theory and pedagogy.

Taken all these theoretical premises in second language acquisition, studies (Pica, 1994; Nakahama, Tyler, & Van Lier 2001; Long & Porter 1985; Doughty, Pica, & Young, 1987; Lincoln-Porter, Linnell, Paninos, & Pica 1996) show that negotiation of meaning contributes to the acquisition of second language learning. Doughty, Pica, and Young investigated whether L2 learners' interaction with other learners contributed to address the input, output, and feedback needs of L2 learners. For this, they had two main groups of five dyads each. They compared the interaction of five dyads of English L2 learners with that of five dyads

of learners and English native speakers on two communication tasks. The study confirmed what other studies in this field had disclosed: that interaction where negotiation takes place considerably increases the opportunities for L2 learning. The study revealed that in both types of interaction learners' needs in terms of input, feedback, and output are addressed; however, interaction between learners "does not provide as much modified input [input that has been modified due to meaning negotiation] and feedback as interaction with native speaker does" (Lincoln-Porter, Linnell, Paninos, & Pica, 1996, p. 59). However, the learners' need to produce modified output was addressed similarly in both groups. This shows that English language learners can improve their L2 proficiency by interacting with tutors who are English language learners.

The understanding of interaction and negotiation of meaning and their impact on comprehension is also explored in the study of Doughty, Pica, and Young. They compared the listening comprehension of 16 non-native speakers of English on directions to a task presented by a native speaker of English under two input conditions: pre-modified input (input that has been simplified by making it more redundant and less complex) and interactionally modified input (input that has been modified as a result of meaning negotiation). Results showed that "comprehension was best assisted when the content of the directions was repeated and rephrased in interaction; however, reduction in linguistic complexity in the pre-modified input was not a significant factor in NNSs' comprehension" (Doughty, Pica, & Young, 1987, p. 737). But perhaps the most significant finding was that interaction was more effective on comprehension when involved comprehension and confirmation checks and clarification requests accompanied by a lot of repetition and rephrasing of input. This is precisely what takes place in writing conferences, for "as a conversational strategy, negotiating meaning in the writing center conference can help students notice areas that create comprehension problems" (Ritter, p. 106). In addition, negotiating meaning leads not only to better comprehension but also to more successful revisions. Goldstein & Conrad's 1990 study on student input and meaning negotiation in ESL writing conferences showed that meaning negotiation plays a very important role in subsequent revision (p. 456). Why does negotiation lead to a more successful revision? They try to explain this positive outcome of negotiation by asserting that students "may understand more clearly what to revise, how to revise, and why they need to do so" (p. 457) when negotiating meaning in the writing conference. They also point out that since students need to be more active when interacting and negotiating, they may retain more linguistic structures of the target language.

These and many other studies on the role of meaning negotiation in promoting opportunities for language acquisition imply a change in the way language learning and teaching are addressed. Language classrooms should be settings in which learners have ample opportunities to interact with one another through meaningful real-world activities. They should constitute a setting where the socio-linguistic component of language is fully explored and where illocutionary acts give way to the acquisition of language. Activities should be

carefully planned to make negotiation of meaning possible. It is in this context that writing centers play an important role in the learning process of ESL writers. They constitute the perfect setting where authentic and meaningful interactions occur.

Language acquisition is a very complex process in which several aspects are involved. ESL teachers and tutors should take advantage of this research on meaning negotiation to appropriately use it to enhance other features important for successful communication in a second language, for example, culture. Language is so impregnated in a person's culture and personality that becomes him/herself. To effectively communicate in a second language, the learner needs to modify some aspects of his/her way of conducting in order not to be misconstrued by speakers of the target language.

Another important aspect that is required for an ideal learning atmosphere is "elicitations from teachers that seek to check on learners' understanding and not merely on the form of their spoken production" (Doughty, Pica, & Young, 1987, p. 754). However, this should not be misconstrued as the total abandonment of grammatical or linguistic competence. This assumption is very dangerous and inaccurate. You cannot speak a target language without some adequate knowledge of the structure of this language. Consequently, tutors should not abandon meaningful grammatical discussions in the sessions with English language learners. In this sense, it is okay to switch from a non-directive to a directive approach, from collaborators to informants. As J. J. Ritter says, "the implication here is that native-speaking tutors may have to include more grammar instruction in ESL tutoring conferences since they have knowledge about English, which their ESL students may need but will probably never attain without instruction" (p. 102). Negotiation takes place when one is discussing grammatical forms and meaning, which will contribute in making better writers.

Finally, I would like to conclude with some relevant aspects of the collaborative theory and meaning negotiation which find support not only in several research studies but also in the work of well-known constructivist education philosophers such as Dewey and Vygostky. Dewey advocated for schools "to engage students in meaningful activities where they had to work with others on problems. Purposeful activity in social setting [is] the key to genuine learning . . ." (Phillips & Soltis, 1998, p. 56). This thought has had a great impact on language acquisition because it has dealt with themes like conversational discourse, cooperative group learning, socio cultural factors, and interactionist theories like Long's. Like Dewey, Vygostky supported the notion that learning takes place in social setting. He asserted that "interacting with adults and peers in cooperative social setting gave the young learner ample opportunity to observe, imitate, and subsequently develop higher mental functions" (Ibid, p. 59). The study of Pica et al. (1996) on language learners' interaction corroborated this assertion. It proved that the interaction that takes place during communication tasks "can assist L2 learning whether the source of that interaction is an NS or another learner" (p. 80). This and other studies also supported another aspect of Vygostky's theory—learning potential. He "explained that through interaction, children will move

from their zone of actual development to their zone of potential development through adults' expert guidance. This progression is known as the zone of proximal development" (Zainuddin, Yahya, Morales-Jones, & Ariza, 2002, pp. 254-255). In other words, actual development is what the learner can currently do, and potential development is what the learner may be able to achieve with assistance. In the writing conferencing, potential development can only be achieved through a communicative approach where students have opportunities to negotiate meaning.

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