

Interactional Modifications between ESL Learners in the Specification of Negotiation of Meaning and Negative Feedback

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Abstract

This project is designed to analyze the interactional modifications in English conversation between two adult Hong Kong ESL learners with varied language proficiency levels. A consensus task relating to the cultural topics was assigned, and the participants were required to come up with an agreement within a limited time. The host has taken an observant role in the interaction and rarely interferes with the discussion. The speech data is recorded and transcribed. It is hypothesized that (1) the subjects could attain the intended communicative goal and (2) the subject with relatively higher language proficiency would take an initiative role during the negotiation of meanings. The analysis session focuses on investigating three main types of interactional modifications: clarification requests, recasts, and explicit correction while the emergence and the effectiveness of different types of interactional modifications are also evaluated. It is observed that implicit feedback like clarification requests and recast appear more frequently compared with explicit feedback in adult communication. Nonetheless, a recast might sometimes be omitted if the recipients tend to focus on the content instead of the form of English or when a long recast is involved. Hence, it is reflected that a short and precise recast should be adopted to give effective feedback in communication.

Keywords: applied linguistics, applied English linguistics, L2 acquisition, language acquisition, language learning

1. Introduction

In this paper, an interview is conducted to investigate the interactional modifications in the L2 conversation between two adult ESL learners with different English proficiencies. They are required to complete a consensus task on cultural topics within a limited time span. The host of the interview would only take up the role of observant unless there are serious communication breakdowns. It is proposed that (1) the subjects could successfully achieve the intended communication goal and (2) the subject with better language capabilities would take the relatively dominant and initiative role during the negotiation of meanings. The analysis will focus on three major types of interactional modifications: clarification request, recast, and explicit correction while the emergence and effectiveness of various types of interactional modification are also assessed.



1.1. Participants

The subjects, who would be referred to as Billy and Kim, were both born in Hong Kong with the first language as Cantonese. Both of their families adopt Cantonese as the only communicative language, and they have started acquiring English as their second language since primary school in the instructed setting. Both are categorized as young adults whose ages lie between 18 to 23 years old of the same gender. Billy would be considered as the more proficient and skilled English user as he attained level 4 in the HKDSE English subject, and he had attended an English medium secondary school. He is currently a college student who has moderate exposure to second language speaking, and he stresses more confidence in speaking and listening. Comparatively, Kim obtained level 2 in the HKDSE English subject, he commented that he struggles to understand complex English sentences with a limited scope of vocabulary. He is currently working as a customer service officer in a bank that adopts Cantonese and Mandarin as the dominant communicative mediums. To ensure objectivity, both subjects have no prior contact with each other, so the discussion results solely depend on the interaction during the experiment. Both subjects share a common interest in travelling, hence, the task would be related to the discussion of cultural topics.

1.1.1. Data Collection Tools

The following materials would be used while conducting the interaction analysis:

Three computers for the host and the two participants to join the online Zoom meeting.

1.1.2. Procedure

The data collection was conducted via Zoom in Hong Kong time from 7:30 pm to 8:30 pm on 25 February 2022. As the participants did not know each other before the meeting, they felt a little embarrassed to turn on the Zoom camera at the very beginning. Hence, the host had taken the initiative to introduce both to each other and encourage them to share more about their interests in Cantonese. After the greetings, they played a popular ice-breaking game ‘Two Truth and One Lie’ in English. Everyone took turns to claim three ‘facts’ about themselves and the others needed to guess the fake one, and the game rotated for five rounds. The warm-up session took approximately 30 minutes, and both participants agreed to open the Zoom camera for the interaction task.

During the consensus task, the participants were told to choose five cultural features that they found most representative of a particular country. As they looked slightly confused, the host further supplemented that the suggested features should be something concrete, like an excursion destination, food or symbol. Furthermore, the host advised them to be aware of the time as it should take no longer than 10 minutes, this reminder aims to motivate the participants to adopt the more effective and efficient interactional modification strategies in the task. Finally, the recorded time was around 9 minutes 30 seconds. The task ran smoothly and needed no interference, they commented that the activity was not too demanding. The host expressed gratitude towards their participation and ended the Zoom meeting.

1.1.3. Transcript

Host: So here comes to the question, please come up with five cultural features that you find most representative of a particular culture, and these culture should be something concrete, like an excursion destination, some kind of food, or maybe symbols. Please note that the interaction should be no longer than 10 minutes, and please be aware of the time. The time now is 8:49, and you may start now.

Billy: Let's talk about British.

Kim: British.

Billy: Do you know about British? British culture.

Kim: Yeah, British like and (...)I didn't mean to, like, I just know the city or mainly about the city or something.

Billy: Let's talk about that then. Oh sure, um, first I think the most about, the Globe, you know the Globe, theatre.

Kim: What is the Globe, feature?

Billy: Yeah. The Globe Theatre.

Kim: Oh. Theatre.

Billy: Well, it's about a William Shakespeare.

Kim: I just thought it's like the earth ball, right, is it the plastic ball, like the earth.

Billy: Oh no, this is it for William Shakespeare.

Kim: Oh.

Billy: Yeah, the globe, the globe.

Kim: Oh, I don't know.

Billy: Yes, it's located in London, as it have so much history, you know, It's built at around one thousand five hundred, I don't, I don't sure I'm not sure about that.

Kim: One thousand five hundred year ago right?

Billy: Yeah, the years. Yeah, and as I know as take fire burns, and built it years later.

Kim: And rebuilt it years later.

Billy: Yes, and rebuilt it years later.

Kim: Oh, cool.

Billy: But as I know, it's just shown a one times only just have one show only for William Shakespeare.

Kim: Oh, have you ever been nearby the globe?

Billy: No. I want to go there once also.

Kim: How is it like, like now, I mean the the the shape of the theatre or something. What's special about the theatre?

Billy: (...) That's just have a long history, and just about William Shakespeare, you know, William Shakespeare is so well known.

Kim: Yeah, but I don't really know much about this person.

Billy: Nevermind (...) just a great person about drama and musical.

Kim: Drama and musical (...) Cool (...).

Billy: How about the next cultural feature?

Kim: Yeah.

Billy: Maybe I think about British as fish and chips.

Kim: Fish and chips.

Billy: Yeah, you must know it, right?

Kim: Yeah, maybe. The first thing come up should be like (...) fish and chips around (...), like what we can eat in McDonald's.

Billy: I think so, but I'm not sure it is from British, it is so famous food. And it is just eat at Friday right?

Kim: Friday. So the British is like (...) I don't know (laugh). They mainly like (...) eat on Friday, or something.

Billy: Yeah, I heard about something like that, it's just eat at Friday. Maybe some chill.

Kim: Oh. This is so special culture for me. Huh (...). Can you come up with another like culture about?

Billy: OK. Let's move on to the next feature.

Kim: Sure, sure next feature.

Billy: You know, Cambridge is also a big cultural feature about British (...)

Kim: Pardon, Cambridge, you mean the university?

Billy: As a university, but it's also a town. It's a town in London.

Kim: Pardon, town, right, town.

Billy: Yeah.

Kim: Oh, it's a town. I just know about the university. It's very famous. Oh (...) it is a town, I don't know that.

Billy: Yeah, the university is mean about the town.

Kim: Oh, what's the special of the town, special thing.

Billy: Um, I'm not sure, but as I know, that university is also very famous you know men all students all over the world also want to get into the Cambridge University.

Kim: Yeah, that's very cool I mean can be one of the students in here.

Billy: Yeah, that's on, I think the next cultural feature must be London.

Kim: London. Yeah, sure. This is the capital.

Billy: Yeah, the capital and the largest city of England.

Kim: Oh, is it the largest city in the England?

Billy: Yes, exactly.

Kim: Oh, really.

Billy: It's sent on River of Framas [Thames].

Kim: Rivers and farmers?

Billy: Yes. The name of the river. I know it's very big and you know the London Bridge.

Kim: Yeah. London Bridge, yeah.

Billy: Yeah, it's so famous.

Kim: Something like falling down (laugh).

Billy: Yeah (laugh).

Kim: Oh Yeah. I mean, I haven't seen it before but I just like know this by song or something.

Billy: Yeah. The London Bridge. History of London Bridge is about (...) I know. Do you know why the people always say London Bridge is falling down?

Kim: Nope (...), why.

Billy: It's about, it's about a history, about the war.

Kim: War?

Billy: Yeah, the (...) as I know. The citizens are going to burn the bridge and let it fall down to escape from the enemy.

Kim: Oh, escape from the enemy.

Billy: Yeah.

Kim: Oh sure.

Billy: It's about winning a war or else, as I know it's like, how about moving to the last cultural feature of British.

Kim: Sure.

Billy: Yeah the last cultural feature I think is Concord.

Kim: Concord?

Billy: Yeah. Do you know it?

Kim: Concord? Nope (...). Is it an adjective?

Billy: Yes, Concord.

Kim: Concord? What's that?

Billy: Concord is the largest and the most famous college, I think high school in London.

Kim: Oh it's a high school in London.

Billy: In the UK, not in London.

Kim: Oh

Billy: Yes.

Kim: In UK, yeah sure.

Billy: The size of Concord, much bigger than Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Kim: Oh, I mean, I mean the size of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Right?

Billy: Yes.

Kim: It should be like the biggest (university) in Hong Kong right?

Billy: Yes. And also, many, many students all over the world. Once again, and as it's the first high school in UK. It's located at Shrewspeer, ah not Shrewspeer sorry. It's Shrewsbury.

Kim: Oh, should we like conclude all the points like you've been talked about (...) the five points like. First point should be like the Globe right. The Globe theatre. And the second one is like the food right. Fish and chips right? And the third point should be like I remember is the London right, London City.

Billy: Yeah, London.

Kim: And we also talked about like the Cambridge right Cambridge town. Yeah, and the last one should be

Billy: Concord

Kim: Yeah, Concord.

Billy: Yeah.

Kim: Oh cool.

Billy: That's all five cultural feature about British.

2. Interaction Analysis

In general, both participants actively engaged in the interaction and shared approximately equal contributions to the discussion results. They focused on listing the five significant features of British culture and reaching a consensus by the end of the discussion. It was observed that they were paying extra effort in clarifying the potentially misconceived ideas between one another, especially when they came across unfamiliar vocabularies or pragmatic situations, the emergence frequency of different types of interactional modifications are summarized as follows:

Table 1.

Frequency analysis table based on the transcript

Interactional modification devices	Frequency (%)
<u>Negotiation of meaning</u>	
Clarification request	7 (43.75%)
Comprehension check	3 (18.75%)
Confirmation check	3 (18.75%)
Subtotal:	13 (81.25%)
<u>Correction Feedback</u>	
Recast	2 (12.50%)
Explicit correction	1 (6.25%)
Subtotal:	3 (18.75%)
Total:	16 (100%)

Based on Table 1, it is recorded that negotiation of meaning (81.25%) occurred more frequently compared to giving negative correction feedback (18.75%) while clarification request (43.75%) was the most common device adopted during the experiment, examples are demonstrated below.

Interactional Modification I

Billy: Let's talk about that then. Oh sure, um, first I think the most about, the Globe, you know the Globe, theatre.

Kim: What is the Globe, feature? → *Clarification request*

Billy: Yeah. The Globe Theatre.

Kim: Oh. Theatre.

Billy: Well, it's about a William Shakespeare.

Kim: I just thought it's like the earth ball, right, is it the plastic ball, like the earth.

Billy: Oh no, this is it for William Shakespeare. → *Explicit correction*

Kim: Oh.

The first interactional modification was noticed when the participants were suggesting the first significant feature of Britain. Billy claimed that the Globe was an emblematic feature while Kim might not have heard of this excursion spot before. Kim made a clarification request

because he was not sure whether Billy was pronouncing the keyword accurately or if there might be a possibility of mistaking the word ‘feature’ [/'fiʃər/] to ‘theatre’ [/'θiətər/]. The reason is that the pronunciation of the unvoiced [f/] and [θ/] are commonly mixed up, just like the word ‘three’ [θri/] and ‘free’ [fri/] is usually misread due to the condensed pronunciation shared by the Chinese or Cantonese speakers. Additionally, Kim considered the Globe was indeed referring to the map of the world which is in a ball shape, looking like the earth, hence, he intended to clarify the meaning or explore the possibilities of mispronunciation. Yet, Billy further confirmed his claim by linking the relationship between the theatre and the famous playwright, William Shakespeare. By that time, Kim recognized that he had misunderstood the meaning of the term, so he talked about what he originally perceived. Billy provided an explicit correction ‘oh no, this is for William Shakespeare’ which clearly indicates that Kim had gone off the track and clarified that the Globe is an architectural construction instead of a decorative object. Based on the extracted sample, it is observed that clarification requests are somewhat useful in notifying the occurrence of communication breakdown and clarifying the confusion, whereas explicit correction might serve as a more efficient and straightforward way to indicate the imprecision.

Interactional Modification II

Billy: Yes, it's located in London, as it have so much history, you know, It's built at around one thousand five hundred, I don't, I don't sure I'm not sure about that.

Kim: One thousand five hundred year ago right? ← *Clarification request*

Billy: Yeah, the years. Yeah, and as I know as take fire burns, and built it years later.

Kim: And rebuilt it years later. ← *Recast*

Billy: Yes, and rebuilt it years later.

Next, the interactional modification occurred when they were discussing the history of the Globe. By referring to the context, Billy intended to state that the Globe was built in the 1500s. However, he misread the term from ‘fifteen hundred’ to ‘one thousand five hundred’. The prior term usually refers to a particular year or a specified time span, yet the latter refers to the quantity of number, for example, the amount of money or the duration of years. The misread term caused ambiguities for Kim to think about whether his partner was referring to the duration of time or the particular point of time. Hence, Kim initiated the clarification request to check whether the statement referred to the meaning of a certain period ago’. The clarification request was considered successful to a large extent as Billy had replied and addressed the confusion by answering that it referred to the year.

Another feedback occurred when they were trying to recall the accident that happened in the Globe. Billy would like to purport that the theatre was once caught on fire and reconstruction was carried out afterwards in order to restore the original outlook. Yet, he misused the word ‘built’ instead of ‘rebuilt’ which does not carry the meaning of renovation after the collapse. In view of that, Kim tried to correct the sentence by recasting it into ‘and rebuilt it years later’. The recast was considered successful as it aroused Billy’s attention towards the correction feedback. He noticed the misuse of vocabulary and revised the word into a more accurate form. It is noted that clarification requests could be effective in addressing the ambiguities that arise during discussion while a short recast would be effective in arousing interlocutors’ attention (Ellis and Sheen, 2006; Philip, 2003) towards the adjustment of a single item.

Interactional Modification III

Billy: I think so, but I'm not sure it is from British, it is so famous food. And it is just eat at Friday right?

Kim: Friday. So the British is like (...) I don't know (laugh). They mainly like (...) eat on Friday, or something. ← *Recast*

Billy: Yeah, I heard about something like that, it's just eat at Friday. Maybe some chill.

The third interactional modification was taken place when they were suggesting the British food culture. Billy claimed that fish and chips were one of the most representative cuisines in the United Kingdom. He supplemented that the natives usually have fish and chips for meals on Fridays. However, it was observed that there were grammatical violations in the use of prepositions and plurality. Billy had mistaken 'on Fridays' for 'at Friday'. The former term is more accurate because it is well-established to use 'on' a particular date or a day, for instance, on 28th March 2022 or on weekdays while 'at' is usually used when referring to a particular point of time or a location, for example, at eight o'clock, at night or at university. Furthermore, it would be more appropriate to use 'Fridays' if we are referring to more than one Friday as a kind of regular practice. Kim had noted one ungrammaticality of the use of prepositions and tried to recast the sentence to 'they mainly like (...) eat on Friday'. However, the recast did not meet the expectation in correcting the sentence because there were other contextual contents involved other than the recast feedback. Moreover, Billy had been concentrating mainly on the content of the conversation and ignored the correction feedback in this case. He responded and repeated the incorrect phrase 'eat at Friday' again. Therefore, it implies that recast is not always useful if a long recast is adopted, or the sentence involves extra information which potentially distracts the concentration of the interactant. Also, recast might not be explicit enough to arouse the recipient's attention towards the mistaken form of language. If the interlocutors tend to focus more on contextual meaning, it is likely for them to disregard negative feedback.

Interactional Modification IV

Billy: Yeah the last cultural feature I think is Concord.

Kim: Concord? ← *Confirmation check*

Billy: Yeah. Do you know it? ← *Comprehension check*

Kim: Concord? Nope (...). Is it an adjective? ← *Clarification request*

Billy: Yes, Concord.

Kim: Concord? What's that? ← *Clarification request*

Billy: Concord is the largest and the most famous college, I think high school in London.

The last interactional modification was occurred to negotiate the meaning when stating Concord college as the last listed feature of the British culture. Billy mentioned Concord without collocated with 'high school' or 'college' at the beginning. Hence, Kim who did not know about this school felt bewildered. He had given a confirmation check by repeating the preceding statement with a rising intonation 'Concord?'. This signified Billy that the name of the high school might be a novel term to Kim, so he responded with the comprehension check 'Do you know it?' to ensure Kim's understanding of the referent. Kim was confused about the part of speech of the vocabulary and suspected that 'Concord' was a descriptive word, so he gave a clarification request 'is it an adjective?' and 'What's that?'. The negotiation of meaning is considered successful as Billy was able to capture the possibility for Kim to misunderstand the word, hence, providing an explanation to him accordingly. The negotiation devices were

considered constructive as the interactants could convert the communication malfunction to mutual understanding. It is noticed that clarification request is the major device that is adopted frequently by the listener to seek extensive explanation and provide supplementary information on the discussion topic to enhance interpretive accuracy.

2.1. Implications

It is noticed that interlocutors tend to focus on practicality rather than grammatical accuracy. It is likely for them to ignore the correction feedback about the grammatical mistakes like the use of prepositions, articles and structure-dependency if these do not affect the meaning as a whole. Different from the assumptions shared by some researchers that interaction serves as means of receiving linguistic data for grammar building and modifying the output in ways that expand their current interlanguage capacity (Pica et al, 1996), which is used to consider more grammar-focused. Yet, this research proposed that negotiation occurs more frequently when there are impacts on the utterance or the coherence of context. Some researchers considered that negotiation of meaning occurs more likely to result in lexical rather than morphosyntactic adjustment (Skehan and Foster, 2001). More researchers contributed to the discussion of negotiation of meaning which places communicative purposes as a crucial competence in second language acquisition. Long (1980) made the Interactional Hypothesis that comprehensible input is necessary and sufficient for successful second language acquisition. Swain (1985, 1993) suggested that it is essential for learners to be able to produce comprehensive output in order to achieve control over linguistic forms. This means that the capability of producing comprehensible output correlates with the acquisition of grammar items. Based on the findings that the conversation between interlocutors tends to concentrate on the coherence of comprehensible input, the instructor's role should provide more guidance on the inaccuracy of form. According to the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990; 1992; 1995), students could identify the 'gap' if they are consciously alerted about the issues, which could indeed be achieved by giving corrective feedback. It is difficult for second language learners to improve their language abilities or understand linguistic features unless they consciously notice the input. Even though it is more general to conduct task-based activities in class nowadays, teachers are supposed to arouse students' attention towards the form of language as the acquisition of linguistic items shares intercorrelated significance with communication competence.

In the experiment, it is also observed that recast serves as one of the common ways to provide correction feedback to the interactants. It is worth noticing that a long recast is less effective compared to a short one. According to Ellis and Sheen (2006), the implicitness or explicitness of recasts is determined by whether the learner could consciously notice the error and to what extent they are aware of the issues. It is observed that a long recast that involves additional information or repetition of other error-free content may distract the interlocutor's focus towards the particular error. Instead, keep the recast simple and precise so the other could spot the mistake immediately and revise his/her own sentence (Courtney, 2001; Oliver and Mackey, 2003). Philp (2003) scrutinized learners' capability to recall recasts right after listening to them. The author also discovered the group of less proficient learners could recall short recasts much better than the long ones. The recasts with less than three adjustments could be recalled more accurately in most cases. Additionally, recasts are more effective when they come in an intensive manner (Ellis and Sheen, 2006) by focusing on the same form item repeatedly. Therefore, it is concluded that the linguistic focus, number of changes, length of recast and manner of emphasis could influence the effectiveness of the recast (McDonough, 2005; Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994). Yet, even though recast is recognized as a somewhat useful method to give correction feedback to language learners, it is relatively hard to achieve between

interactants as it is less likely for people to give responses that only provide comments on the adjustment of grammatical accuracy without further meaningful content (Ko, Schallert and Walters, 2003). Also, the interlocutors may not find it natural to deliver, as well as hindering the possibility of interrupting the discussion. Hence, it might be useful if the observant could point out the mistakes during the post-task discussion.

2.2. Limitations and Further Research

In this experiment, I invited two adult participants to the task. Although both possess a varied English proficiency level based on the HKDSE results, they have adequate fluency due to their prior language exposure throughout the years. Both have a sufficient vocabulary and manage to understand various types of sentence structure. Therefore, it is less likely for them to experience severe communication breakdowns or notice significant discrepancies in the form of language. In view of that, it might be better to invite younger participants who lie between Grade 3 to 6. It is because children are usually basic to intermediate English users who have limited vocabulary and less accurate use of grammar. It is easier for them to encounter novel expressions, which potentially lead to confusion and communication breakdown, hence, more interactional modification devices would be used in order to maintain the discussion. Furthermore, there is a potential for a different pattern of interactional modification to be observed if the target participants are children. As it might be more common for young interlocutors to negotiate meaning by giving explicit feedback like 'no', 'it is not like this', and 'I don't mean that way' which is considered more efficient for mutual understanding.

Then, it might be thought-provoking whether it is better to invite participants who know each other before the task. In my experiment, I deliberately selected two participants who do not know one another to attend the assessment. It is because prior knowledge regarding the partner's experiences, habits, preferences or interests could help with the understanding of meanings based on the nonverbal clues. Negotiation of meaning or correction feedback will occur less frequently if they know each other very well. Hence, picking random individuals can guarantee that mutual understanding solely depends on the interaction. Yet, one significant drawback is that it takes time for ice-breaking. Before I began the task, it took around 30 minutes to get my participants relaxed and familiar with the partner, which is even longer than the recorded task (9mins 30sec). It is expected to be more time-consuming if involving shy or less talkative participants, so there are both pros and cons to picking random subjects.

There are also some reflections on the suitable type of task to be conducted for easy analysis. It might be feasible to conduct a spot-the-difference or picture description task as the content and duration would be more manageable. In my task, I performed the consensus task in which the participants were told to choose five cultural features that they found most representative of a particular country. Undoubtedly, the consensus task employs great flexibility which allows larger room for imagination and elaboration, nonetheless, if the participants just stick with very simple English or suggest too straightforward items, it is unlikely to observe many hiccups along with the conversation, and the task will end quickly. Comparatively, tasks like spot-the-difference have more constraints on the portrait of ideas. As they are required to find and explain the difference between pictures, they need to try their best to express themselves in their own words and seek clarification if they encounter unfamiliar terms. The relatively close-ended tasks may enhance the opportunities for interactional modifications.

3. Conclusion

In sum, it is observed that the subjects could attain the intended communication goal by reaching a consensus on the five cultural features in the discussion. Yet, the subject with higher language proficiency does not always appeal to be taking the dominant and initiative role during the negotiation of meaning. Both subjects appear to be active when negotiating meaning, and the less proficient participant is sometimes more aggressive in seeking clarification and checking meaning. It is concluded that negotiation of meaning and the use of correction feedback are essential during conversations even between adult interlocutors who have a richer scope of knowledge and perceived experiences. As the level of proficiency and prior exposure vary, misconceptions in terms of the use of vocabulary and pragmatics are likely to occur. In response to the proposed hypotheses, it is expected that the participants could successfully achieve the communicative goal, however, none of them was performing a significant leadership role during the interaction. It is observed that implicit feedback like clarification requests and recast appear more frequently compared with explicit feedback in adult communication as it would be milder and gentler to deliver. Nonetheless, a recast might sometimes be omitted if the recipients tend to focus on the content instead of the form of English or when a long recast is involved. Hence, it is reflected that a short and precise recast should be adopted to give effective feedback in communication.

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