Negotiation for Meaning Routines in Audio SCMC Interactions: An Expanded Framework

Chenxi (Cecilia) Li, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK
Tim Lewis, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

ABSTRACT
Negotiation for meaning, in response to instances of non-understanding, plays an important role in SLA. Meaning negotiation routines in face-to-face classroom interactions have been identified by Varonis and Gass. Smith expands the model to adapt it to text chat CMC environments. In the past decade, synchronous audio CMC has become commonly used for online language teaching, but its affordances are different from text chat CMC. Therefore, it is necessary to examine what meaning negotiation routines are in language learners’ oral interactions in this new online learning environment. In this study, participants were invited to complete two information gap tasks in which target lexical items were embedded to elicit learners’ negotiation for meaning and then they participated in a stimulated recall interview. Based on the analysis of students’ oral interactions in synchronous audio CMC, the authors propose two new possible stages in negotiation for meaning routines and demonstrate how different modes of communication can affect language learning online.

KEYWORDS
Beijing Foreign Studies University, China EFL, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Interaction Hypothesis, Negotiation for Meaning, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Synchronous Audio CMC

1. INTRODUCTION
1.1. Technology and Language Teaching
As Bax (2003, 2011) foresaw, CALL has become normalized as technology has been fully integrated into second language teaching, learning and research. The past two decades have witnessed the growth of the research field in Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) from its infancy to maturity, with a large number of studies exploring the relationships between different types of technology and second language acquisition (SLA) theories in a variety of linguistic, cultural and educational contexts (Plonsky & Ziegler, 2016; Sauro, 2011). As a result, the main research agenda in CALL has progressed from examining the effectiveness of CALL to studying how the ‘affordances’ of different types of technology can be best used for language learning online (Cunningham & Akiyama, 2018).
Among various approaches to CALL, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), has been one of the most commonly used and widely researched approaches. In their recent review of SCMC (synchronous computer-mediated communication) research, Cunningham and Akiyama (2018) conclude that the field is undergoing reconceptualization and expansion with the advance of technology and the diversification of participants. The central argument in CMC research is that since
communication is mediated by technology, the ‘affordances’ of the technology play an important role in how learners communicate and learn languages in the mediated environment (Yanguas, 2010; Hampel & Stickler, 2012). With the technological development of CMC from asynchronous to synchronous communication, from written text chat messages to audio- and video-conferencing environments, the modes of communication, namely, modality, have gained increasing attention in recent years (Guichon & MacLornan, 2008; Stockwell, 2010). Clearly, audio SCMC is different from text chat CMC in that it ‘affords’ spoken as well as written interactions. Video CMC differs from audio CMC because it enables participants to use visual cues. Therefore, how modalities afford language learning online has become an important question (e.g. Smith, 2003; Hampel & Hauck, 2006; Sauro, 2011, 2012). This study provides a partial insight into the topic by studying specifically how learners interact in audio CMC environments.

1.2. The Interaction Approach in CMC Environments

In their review of theory in CALL research and practice, Hubbard and Levy (2016) observe that, among many SLA theories, the Interaction Approach has been extensively referenced as a theoretical base in CMC research, especially in studies that involve text chat, audio- or video-conferencing as a basis for learner interaction and exchange. As Ellis (2000, p.209) points out, learning arises not through interaction but in interaction.Negotiation for meaning (NfM), defined by Varonis and Gass (1985) as a response to instances of non-understanding rather than misunderstanding, is a central, but contested feature of interaction. Long (1980) first proposed the Interaction Hypothesis which holds that NfM is fundamental to second language acquisition in his doctoral thesis. This was followed by hypothesis testing in classroom interactions (e.g. Varonis & Gass, 1985; Pica & Doughty, 1985; Pica et al., 1989), based on which Long (1996, pp. 451-452) proposed a modified version of the Interaction Hypothesis:

...negotiation for meaning, especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustment by the native speakers or more competent interlocutors, facilitates acquisition as it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways.

Other scholars in the field – particularly those associated with ‘focus on form’ - are less convinced. While conceding that “…interaction plays a strong facilitative role in the learning of lexical and grammatical target items…,” Mackey and Goo (2007) suggest that the paucity of empirical studies dealing with negotiation “…render[s] any arguments for the efficacy of one kind of feedback over another premature…” (p. 440). Adams (2007) observes that “…while research indicates that negotiation for meaning may be quite frequent in learner-learner interactions, there remains little evidence of its effectiveness in promoting learning…” (p. 33). Adams’s own study nonetheless leads her to the conclusion that “…learner-learner interactions can promote second language learning, suggesting that the benefits of interaction are not limited to the native speaker-learner context…” (p. 51).

Despite uncertainty about the developmental value of negotiation, a great deal of effort has been expended by SLA scholars in studying the relative effectiveness of the individual feedback moves (e.g. clarification requests, prompts) associated with it (Mackey & Goo, 2007). Whatever its precise role in supporting acquisition, negotiation certainly facilitates continued interaction between interlocutors, which may represent an indirect benefit. As Hossein Nassaji (2016) points out, “…the aim of interactional feedback can be either conversational or pedagogical…”:

Conversational feedback is used during conversational discourse to repair communication breakdowns, which could be due to comprehension problems. Pedagogical feedback has a more deliberate instructional purpose. … it has the aim of correcting an error or drawing the learner’s attention to form (p. 536).
Towards the Normalization of Web-Based Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) in College English Instruction: Two Cases in China
Hongmei Wang, Hui Yuan and Shanshan Zhang (2014). Teaching Cases Collection (pp. 357-385).
www.igi-global.com/chapter/towards-normalization-web-based-computer/82584?camid=4v1a