

Designing Tasks to Encourage Negotiation of Meaning

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ABSTRACT

According to the Interaction Hypothesis, language acquisition needs comprehensible input, which is obtained through modified interaction accompanied by negotiation of meaning (Long 1996). Based on this hypothesis, the author designed short information gap tasks in which students need to understand each other and overcome communication breakdown, if any, by using negotiation of meaning. Overall, students got engaged in the activity and certain forms of negotiation of meaning naturally occurred. Finally, how to promote the automatization of negotiation strategies for students and future study direction is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

These activities here were designed and implemented in the Center for English Discussion Class (EDC) at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, Japan. EDC is a 28-week compulsory course for all first-year students. The course aims to develop students' communicative abilities through interaction with their peers (Hurling, 2012). In the first lesson of the year, students learn some phrases called Communication Skill phrases (See Figure 1) which serve for negotiation of meaning. Although students are encouraged to use these skills whenever they have a chance, I have noticed that they do not always negotiate meaning during interactions with their peers even when there is an apparent communication breakdown. This sparked my interest in designing activities to increase the chances of negotiation of meaning among students.

1. Comprehension	
Active Listening	Checking Understanding
I see. Okay. Right. Sure. Uh-huh. Really? Sorry, I don't understand. Sorry, I don't follow you.	Do you understand? Do you follow me? Do you see what I mean?
2. Paraphrasing	
Paraphrasing Others	Paraphrasing Yourself
Do you mean...? So, are you saying...? So, in other words, ...?	I mean... What I'm saying is ... In other words, ...
3. Clarification	
Asking for Explanation	Asking for Repetition
Can you explain? What does {X} mean?	Could you repeat that, please? Could you say that again, please?

Figure 1. EDC Communication Skills (Brereton, Lesley, Schaefer, & Young, 2018, p. 100).

Negotiation of meaning is defined as interlocutors' attempts to remedy communication problems "by engaging in interactional work to secure mutual understanding" (Ellis 2015, p. 322) and has been found to facilitate second language acquisition (Swain 1985; Gass 1988). Negotiation of meaning is carried out by means of a variety of strategies. Table 1 illustrates negotiation strategies distinguished by Ellis (2008) compared with Communication Skills taught in EDC. According to Ellis (2008), negotiation strategies take the form of requests for clarification, confirmation checks, recasts, repetition, metalinguistic feedback, elicitation, and explicit

correction. To capture the whole picture of EDC Communication Skills, comprehension check is also included in the list as originally suggested by Long (1983) as a form of negotiation of meaning (see Table 1).

Table 1. Negotiation Strategies compared with EDC Communication Skills.

Strategy (from Ellis, 2008; Long, 1983)	Equivalent Skills Taught in EDC (from Brereton et al., 2018)	Communication Example
Comprehension check	Comprehension	<i>"Do you understand?"</i>
Request for clarification	Clarification	<i>"What do you mean?"</i>
Confirmation check	Paraphrasing	<i>"Do you mean X?"</i>
Recast	Paraphrasing	<i>"Laws job." "Lawyer?"</i>
Repetition	N.A.	<i>"Laws job." "Laws job?"</i>
Metalinguistic feedback	N.A.	<i>"How do you say 'ka' in English?" "Mosquito."</i>
Elicitation	N.A.	<i>"'Ka' is bite." "A mosquito is...?"</i>
Explicit correction	N.A.	<i>"'Ka' is bite." "Oh, a mosquito is biting."</i>

DISCUSSION

There have been many attempts to explain what kind of input best helps students learn a language in classroom settings. According to the Interaction Hypothesis (Long 1996), learners need conversational interaction to acquire a language. When there is communication difficulty, interlocutors have to adjust their speech and use other techniques to make input comprehensible for the other party. This comprehensible input is supposed to best help learners acquire a language, and the process of making comprehensible input is negotiation of meaning. One effective way of teaching negotiation of meaning is use of tasks. Various tasks have been designed to encourage learners to negotiate meaning. A task as defined by Ellis (2003) has the following conditions:

1. It is meaning focused
2. There is some kind of gap
3. Learners use their own linguistic resources
4. There is communicative outcome.

Studies have found that certain kinds of tasks promote more negotiation of meaning than others. For instance, pair work and group work provide more opportunities for negotiation of meaning than teacher-fronted instruction (Long & Porter 1985; Pica & Doughty 1985; Doughty & Pica, 1986; Johnson 1995), two-way tasks involve more negotiation than one-way tasks (Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1987), and closed tasks lead to more negotiation of meaning than open tasks (Pica et al., 1989; Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993; Plough & Gass 1993).

In a typical EDC lesson, opinion exchange tasks are used for discussions in two to five person groups. For example, students are asked to discuss questions such as "Should everyone go to university?" and "What are some good ways for cities to be more eco-friendly?" in small groups. These tasks are characterized as pair/group, two/multiple-way, and open tasks. When viewed in light of the previous research, closed tasks are likely better suited to the promotion of negotiation of meaning than open tasks. Thus, I designed some information gap tasks, which are pair/group, two-way, and closed tasks, to help students use more negotiation of meaning. One of such tasks is the Spot the Difference activity (See Appendix for a sample task). The detailed procedure is

explained in the next section.

PROCEDURE

The Spot the Difference activity is conducted in the following steps. This is for an eight-student class, and may require slight modification for classes with different students. It takes about ten minutes for instruction, implementation, and feedback. If used in the test-teach-test approach, different sets of picture cards are needed for the first and the second tests, and it takes about 15 minutes in total. (Test-teach-test is a method of teaching where “learners first complete a task or activity without help from the teacher. Then, based on the problems seen, the teacher plans and presents the target language. Then the learners do another task to practise the new language” (TeachingEnglish, 2006.)

1. Prepare four sets of pictures (Card 1 and Card 2) which are similar, but not exactly the same, to each other.
2. Divide students into four pairs.
3. Give instructions to the students.
 - i. Students in the same pair will get similar but different pictures.
 - ii. Each pair should find as many differences as possible between two pictures.
 - iii. Students cannot show their pictures to each other.
 - iv. Students can only use English.
 - v. Students cannot use gestures.
 - vi. Students have five minutes for the activity.
4. Give a different card to each student in each pair.
5. After five minutes, stop the activity and ask how many differences they were able to find.
6. Allow students to quickly compare the pictures by showing them to each other.
7. Give feedback on the use of negotiation of meaning and any other language items as needed.

Arrangement of Students

Make students stand or sit in two lines face-to-face. Students across from each other make a pair. Give Card 1 to one side of students and Card 2 to the other, so that they cannot see the different card. When pairing the students, not much consideration is needed with the proficiency of the students, because this activity naturally requires two-way exchange to complete the task, and the more difficult the communication is, the more likely negotiation of meaning occurs. In case of odd number of students, make one three-person group and give the same cards to two students. These two students can work together to explain their picture.

Timing

This activity best suits in the presentation stage of Communication Skills in the EDC syllabus or negotiation of meaning more generally, and in any review lessons to remind the students how to use the skills. Adopting different sets of pictures would allow students to practice repeatedly without getting bored.

Pictures

Pictures of the target vocabularies of the lesson can be used to practice, raise awareness, or review the language items and the topic. For example, if the lesson’s theme is Japanese culture, pictures of Japanese customs such as taking off shoes at the entrance of a home, or going to a shrine on New Year’s Day can be used. In general, adding some elements of surprise could elicit more negotiation of meaning.

VARIATIONS

For Lower-Level or Less Fluent Students

Pictures that need easy vocabularies and less complicated expressions may be used for lower-level or less fluent students. For example, the differences may be “an apple on the table” or “an apple in the box” and “a boy is standing” or “a boy is jogging”. An extra one or two minutes can be given if students cannot find many differences in the initially allotted time.

For Higher-Level or Talkative Students

The number of differences may be increased, and pictures that need difficult vocabulary items and more complicated expressions may be used for higher level or more talkative students. For example, in the case of pictures of people, the differences could be what people are doing, how they are doing them, and why they are doing them rather than what they wear or what they have in their hands. The total number of the differences may be announced when students think they have found all the answers and actually have not. When students have found most of the differences, the activity may be cut short to avoid dragging on unnecessarily.

Other Teaching Contexts

This activity is suitable for teaching communication skills to all ages from young learners and school children to adult learners. Pictures and necessary vocabulary items may be selected according to students’ needs and interests.

For small children who have a limited vocabulary, rules may be relaxed to allow use of gestures, as using gestures is also one of the communication strategies. To encourage verbal communication skills, teachers’ feedback should focus on the English expression students used during the activity, and showing how they helped communication.

In elementary schools, this activity would be very useful for reviewing what was learned. For example, pictures that show different numbers and colors of things and people with different facial expression could be used from the third grade up; different weather, time of the day and motions could be used for the fourth grade up, various positional relationships could be included from fifth grade up, and various occupations could be used from sixth grade up.

In junior high school and high school, aside from communication practice, this activity would also help students prepare for EIKEN Grade Pre-2 interview tests, in which examinees are asked to verbally illustrate what people in a given picture are doing. (EIKEN is one of the most widely used English-language testing programs in Japan. It is offered at 7 levels: Grade 1, Grade Pre-1, Grade 2, Grade Pre-2, Grade 3, Grade 4, and Grade 5.) Teachers are able to download sample topic cards from EIKEN’s website (EIKEN Foundation of Japan, n.d.), and cut and paste the pictures to make activity cards.

For adult students, this activity could be used for TOEIC listening test preparation as well as for communication practice. In the listening part of TOEIC test, pictures of various situations such as office, town, restaurant, and kitchen are presented, and test takers are asked to answer questions about the pictures. Describing things and people in such pictures is a good practice for the students to get ready for the test. Alternatively, teachers could give a picture to only one person in a pair, and ask the other person to draw a picture as they listen to their partners describe the picture. I have tried this alternative activity with business people, and found it effective although it took more time than comparing two pictures.

Finally, when conducting this activity in a large class of 30 – 40 students, it is important to make sure all students know who they are paired with, face each other, understand the rules, get the correct card face down, and start at the same time, in order to avoid confusion.

CONCLUSION

I have informally tested this activity as a review of Communication Skills in nine classes with students of different English levels (TOEIC scores of 180-680). Students generally enjoyed doing the activity regardless of their English ability. Possible reasons are listed below:

1. Students are familiar with “spot the difference” activity from previous learning experiences
2. The aim of the activity is simple to understand
3. Students can start the activity with a minimum amount of instruction
4. Picture-only cards are easily accepted by students who feel reluctant in reading English
5. Even higher-level students felt the activity was reasonably challenging.

Some form of negotiation of meaning was observed during the activity in all nine classes. The most frequently observed negotiation strategy was repetition. (e.g. A: “Socks.” B: “Socks?”) However, when the difference was too obvious to the students, no negotiation of meaning occurred. (e.g. A: “Socks.” B: “No socks.”) Other negotiation strategies that caught my attention were recast / paraphrasing, (e.g. A: “Socks?” B: “*Washed socks, drying.*”), request for clarification (e.g. A: “Cleaning thing.” B: “Cleaning thing? *Please repeat.*”), and confirmation (e.g. A: “What shape?” B: “Shape? Simple.” A: “*Not circle?*” B: “No.”). Therefore, it may be said that this activity can elicit natural forms of negotiation of meaning from some students. The main purpose of the feedback after the activity was to raise awareness of negotiation of meaning. It focused on the students’ actual use of negotiation of meaning, how it helped solve communication breakdown, and teaching phrases that students can use in more formal occasions, such as “*Do you mean...?*” and “*Do you follow me?*”

In some classes, a similar activity using different sets of picture cards was conducted as the second test of test-teach-test. Following the teacher’s feedback, students seemed to use more negotiation of meaning in the second test. I feel using this activity in test-teach-test format is possibly an effective way for students to acquire the negotiation strategies in actual communication. Therefore, as a next step, I would like to record the conversation during the activity and analyze if negotiation of meaning really occurred, and if it did, what kind of negotiation of meaning happened.

Another idea for future research is to investigate the reasons why students do not sometimes negotiate for meaning even when they are reminded to use Communication Skills. Data may be collected by means of questionnaires, and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. I would like to design new activities to promote negotiation of meaning based on the future study results.

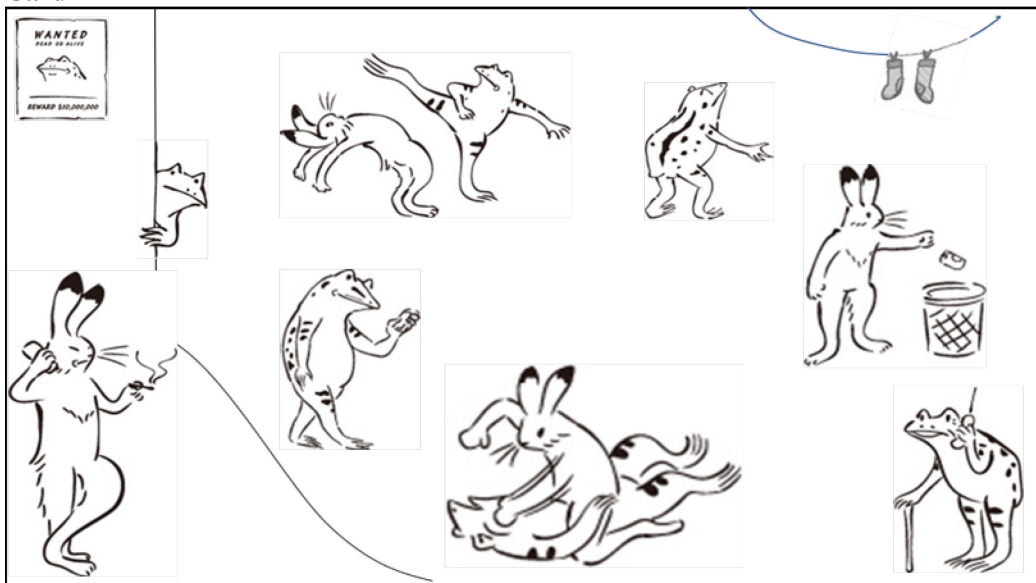
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APPENDIX – Sample Task

Card 1



Card 2

