
Students' Negotiations Of Meaning In Their Speaking Performances In An Indonesian University EFL Classroom

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Abstract: This article reveals how students negotiate meanings in their speaking performances in an Indonesian university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom and effects of the students' negotiations of meaning on their speaking performances in the EFL classroom. Employing a single-case study design, the research leading to the findings was conducted in an EFL classroom at a state university in Makassar, Indonesia. The data were obtained through classroom observation. The findings disclose that in their speaking performances in the EFL classroom, the students performed negotiations of meaning through request for message clarification, repetition, confirmation, elaboration and simplification and the negotiations of meaning used by the students mostly interacted with each other as adjacency pairs. Indisputably, those findings suggest that negotiations of meaning are essentially communicative tools that enable EFL students, particularly those with still low level of English, to build and maintain interactive communications among them.

Keywords: Negotiation of Meaning, Speaking Performance, EFL Classroom

I. INTRODUCTION

When two or more people meet, what usually happens is a verbal interaction called conversation. In this social event, thoughts, feelings and ideas are expressed, questions are asked and answered, or news and information are exchanged. A conversation does not always run smoothly; it can be troubled, and when the trouble is due to an interlocutor's unclear speech or misunderstanding, negotiation of meaning can be employed as the solution.

The term "negotiation of meaning" or "negotiation for meaning" refers to the process that speakers go through to reach a clear understanding of each other in an interactive communication (Long, 1996). The process typically occurs when listener signals to the speaker that the speaker's message is not clear and both speaker and listener work linguistically to resolve the impasse (Pica, 1994). Such a negotiation is employed by the interlocutors to achieve successful communication and to accomplish various functions of language. Simply, negotiation of meaning is a process that speakers go through to reach a clear understanding of each other in a conversation (Foster&Ohta, 2005;Rustandi, 2013). Like other social interactions, conversations among EFL learners in the target language are vulnerable to confusion and misinterpretation. Such communicative problems are mostly due to their levels of English (Storch, 2002). Thus, it does not take a genius just to predict what happens when two students with basic level of English exchange their ideas in a speaking task in the classroom; undoubtedly, despite their limited speaking skills, the students try their best to understand each other, and the conversation is colored by negotiation of meaning. "Born" in such a context, the negotiation of meaning used by the EFL students must have its own typicality.

II.Literature Review

Negotiation of Meaning

Negotiation is communication, but it goes much deeper than the fluent, unbroken sequences of message exchange which characterize the usual concept of communication (Pica, 1996). When interlocutors negotiate for meaning, they engage in any or all of the following activities; 1) they anticipate possible communication breakdowns, as they ask clarification questions and check each other's comprehension, 2) they identify communication breakdowns for each other, and 3) they repair them through signals and reformulations. Thus, it can be seen that what is called negotiation of meaning is basically constructed of four components; trigger, signal, response and follow up.

A trigger is the utterance which stimulates or evokes incomplete understanding on the part of the listener. "Give me a hand", which is said by a native speaker of English to an Indonesian EFL learner, for instance, can trigger a negotiation of meaning since it can lead to the learner's confusion or misunderstanding. The listener's reaction, which indicates his confusion or misunderstanding, is a signal that it takes a negotiation of meaning to maintain the conversation; the signal can expressed through either confirmation check or clarification request. Subsequently, the speaker shows his response to the signal, and it can be self-repetition, other-repetition response, self-modification or

negate response. Afterwards, what occurs as the last component is follow-up, which is typically information about whether the communication modifications have been successful or not. Nonetheless, it is important to note that a negotiation of meaning can be much longer than the above-elucidated process, particularly when the interlocutors have to repeat the signal-response exchange until an agreement is achieved.

Negotiation of Meaning as a Construct in L2 Learning

Negotiation of meaning triggers beneficial changes and results in a more effective language learning experience (Foster&Ohta, 2005;Cook, 2015; Hartono & Ihsan, 2017). This is, as mentioned by Krashen (2001), because the negotiation connects input, internal learner capacities and output in productive ways. In this context, such a negotiation serves as the process in which learners and a competent speaker provide and interpret signals of their own and their interlocutor's perceived comprehension, thus provoking adjustments to linguistic form, conversational structure and message content (Long, 1996;Jyoti, 2020; Rashid,2021).

Negotiation of meaning can be used as a vehicle for language proficiency; it can enhance learners' fluency in a language classroom. Believing this, Long (1996) has introduced two types of task that encourage learners to perform negotiation of meaning in the classroom; one-way task and two-way task. In one-way task, only one learner holds all the information. Meanwhile, in two-way task, all have equal but partially shared information which the learners must exchange to get all the information. It seems that one-way task creates more opportunity for negotiation of meaning, and two-way task creates more strategies for meaning negotiation.

Finally, it can be deduced that in a language classroom, negotiation of meaning is essentially interactionbetween teacher and learners or among learners who make adjustments to their speech and use of other techniques to repair a breakdown in communication. An example of how negotiation of meaning occurs in EFL learning setting can be seen in the following conversation between two students with different levels of competence.

- S1 : "It is a rectangular bench."
S2 : "Rectangular?"
S1 : "You know a rectangle has a um two long sides and two short sides".
S2 : "Uh...rectangle is a square."
S1 : "You've got it."

As we have seen, S2 was not able to understand what S1 said because of vocabulary problem; S2 was troubled by S1' use of rectangular in his utterance. S2 then signaled the problem by uttering "rectangular?", and S1 showed his response to the signal by providing some explanation about the word. Conclusively, S2 acquired the word through the negotiation of meaning process.

Speaking Performance

Of the four language skills which learners intend or are intended to have (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems to be so special and typical. In fact, this productive language skill deals with the most practical need of language as communication system in everyday life; it is about how language is used in verbal interaction (Brown, 2001). As a language skill, speaking, as mentioned by Brown (2001), is constructed of five elements; comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency. Comprehension enables a speaker to initiate and respond to speech; grammar is what the speaker needs to arrange correct sentences in his speech; vocabulary deals with the words that the speaker uses in his speech; pronunciation refers to how the speaker produced the words orally; and fluency includes the speaker's speed of speaking (Jenkins, 2002; Gilbert, 2012Kartal&Simsek, 2017).

Practically, speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information; its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, including the participants themselves, their collective experiences, the physical environment, and the purposes for speaking. Indeed, one of the fundamental features of speaking is that it takes place in real time; speakers have very limited planning time when they have to produce spoken language. This seems to be one of the main reasons why many language learners find speaking difficult despite their sufficient knowledge of the target language.

III. Methodology

The research employed a single-case study design. An EFL class in the faculty of social science of a state university in Makassar, Indonesia, were purposively chosen as the subjects, and the data were obtained through observation. The researcher attended the EFL class as an external observer and recorded the learning processes when the students had the speaking tasks requiring them to verbally interact with each other; guessing game and debate. In the guessing game, every student had to act a famed person, object or place and let the others asked him/her questions before guessing. Meanwhile, in the debate, the students were free to argue with each other on an imaginary case made up by the lecturer.

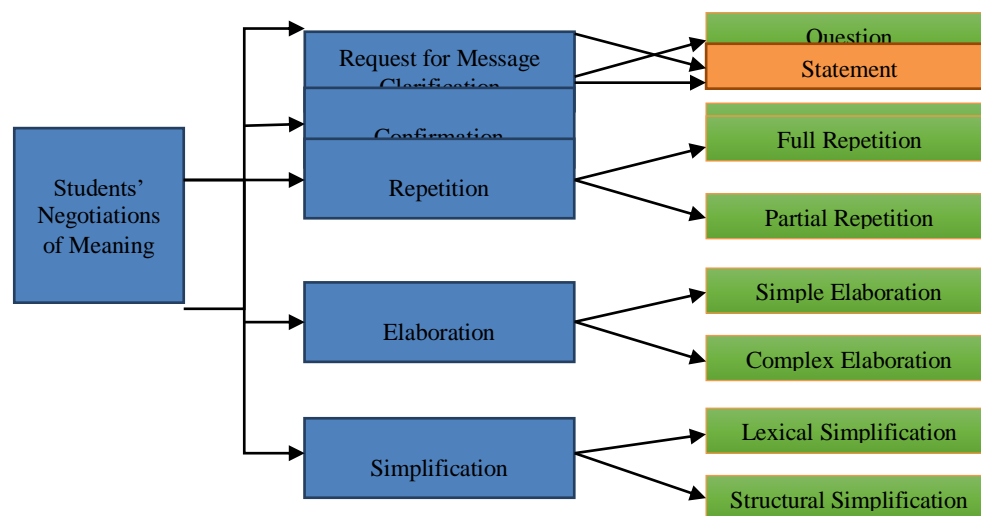
IV. Findings and Discussion

In controlling the two speaking tasks in the EFL classroom, the lecturer tended to set himself as the moderator and corrector to the students' mistakes, signaling that he intended to provide the students with as many opportunities to talk as possible. Accordingly, the students were free to express their ideas and arguments. Overall, the findings reveal that the students could not avoid performing negotiations of meaning in their speaking performances in the EFL classroom. It was so obvious that their use of negotiations of meaning reflected their big willingness to reach clear understanding among them in the interactive communications which they built together.

The Students' Negotiations of Meaning in their Speaking Performance

Specifically, the findings elucidate that the students performed negotiations of meaning through five strategies; request for message clarification, repetition, confirmation, elaboration and simplification. The figure below details features of the five strategies applied by the students in their speaking performances.

Figure 1. Students' Negotiations of Meaning in their Speaking Performances



As we have seen, each of the five negotiation of meaning strategies employed by the students has its own characteristics. The students expressed their requests for message clarification through question and statement, did confirmations through shortened questions, performed repetitions fully and partially, provided elaborations in simple and complex way, and did simplifications lexically and structurally.

Request for Message Clarification

Typically, the students performed a request for message clarification as a speaker's utterance was unclear to their ears, and they employed the simple strategy through either a question or statement as seen in the extracts below.

Extract 1 : Question

Student 5: I am a place. I am from..I am in south Sulawesi...central Sulawesi.

Lecturer: Sorry?

Student 5: I am famous.

Student 9: Are you in central Sulawesi or south Sulawesi?

Extract 2 :Statement

Student 7: No man be visited by women, John should brave approach Jane. Umm...Johs also be able to current state of Jane.

Student 13: Sorry, no understand.

The requests for message clarification above were preceded by the speakers' unclear utterances. Student 9 expressed her request through a simple question as a response to the speaker's wishy-washy statement, while student 13 asked the speaker to clarify his grammatically bad sentence through a statement literally expressing his confusion. Overall, the students' requests for message clarification through imperative sentences seem so standard since they are just to confirm the "mainstream" idea of how to express a request for message clarification. On the contrary, those expressed through statements seem to be "special pizza" since they obviously imply that a request for message clarification can be expressed in a pragmatic way. "Sorry, no understand", for instance, definitely implies something like "Can you clarify what you have just mentioned?".

- Confirmation

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The students confirmed whether their utterances were understandable or whether they did not misunderstand what they heard.

Extract 3

Student 11: You are gorgeous! You know gorgeous?

Student 17: Gorgeous?

Extract 4

Student 14: Soccer is a piece of cake for me.

Student 23: Easy?

The students negotiated meanings through confirmation with different reasons. As we have seen, while student 11's confirmation was to ensure whether the listener understand what he meant by "gorgeous", student 23's was to merely confirm that he did not misunderstand the idiomatic expression used by the speaker. Despite the difference, the students tended to be equal in performing their confirmations; both used a shortened question. The findings lead us to apprehend that in some occasions, the students used this strategy when playing the role of listener; they did this just to ensure whether what they had in their minds was exactly what the speaker meant by his or her statement, and in other occasions, a few students employed this strategy when becoming the speaker; they did this just to find out whether the listeners really got their points.

- Repetition

The students did repetitions mostly to respond to a listener's request for message clarification. In doing so, they used either full or partial repetitions.

Extract 5 :Full Repetition

Student 5: Hmm you, if you don't use me, your legs are hot.

Student 11: If you don't use me?

Student 5: If you don't use me, your legs are hot.

Extract 6 :Partial Repetition

Student 7: I come from New York America.

Student 1: Hmm...New York?

Student 7: Yes, New York America.

As we have seen, the two students repeated their utterances on a listener's request. Despite the similarity, the students performed their repetitions differently; while student 5 repeated what he had just said fully, student 7 tended to just repeat the important part of his utterance. Undoubtedly, the students' tendency to frequently use this strategy in their speaking performances in the EFL classroom was strongly related to their level of English; most of them were EFL learners with still low level of English.

- Elaboration

The students elaborated on their utterances through provisions of additional information about them. In some occasions, they gave a simple elaboration, while in others, they provided a complex one.

Extract 7 :Simple Elaboration

Student 13: You are not bad?

Student 19: bad?

Student 13: I mean bad looking.

Extract 8 :Complex Elaboration

Student 4: Because she is ridiculous.

Student 3: Can you repeat?

Student 4: Because she is ridiculous, she doesn't know and care about the effect to themselves and John.

The two students chose to solve communicative problems occurring in the conversations through elaborations. Student 13 elaborated on what he had said simply by continuing it ("bad" ... "bad looking"), while student 4 did a complex elaboration to make the listener understand what he meant by "she is ridiculous". Accordingly, the research findings suggest that in the context of EFL learners' speaking performances, elaborations are to be divided into two types based on its structural features; simple and complex elaboration. In some occasions in the EFL classroom, the students did a simple elaboration by just mentioning one or two words as the additional information, but in other occasions, they performed a complex elaboration by using new sentences as the additional information.

- Simplification

At some occasions in the EFL classroom, the students had to simplify an utterance just to make it easier to understand. While some simplifications performed by the students were lexical, a few were structural.

Extract 9 :Lexical Simplification

Student 16: I am a famous person, I am Indonesia and umm I am artist, a public figure, umm presenter, actor. I then, I then...yes. I so rich I many luxury car, I have luxury residence.

Student 23: Residence?

Student 16: Residence...umm...house...home.

Extract 10 :Structural Simplification

Student 2: John is not guilty. Remember uh he is troubled by the storm.

Student 21: Sorry?

Student 2: Umm I mean uh the storm is his big trouble.

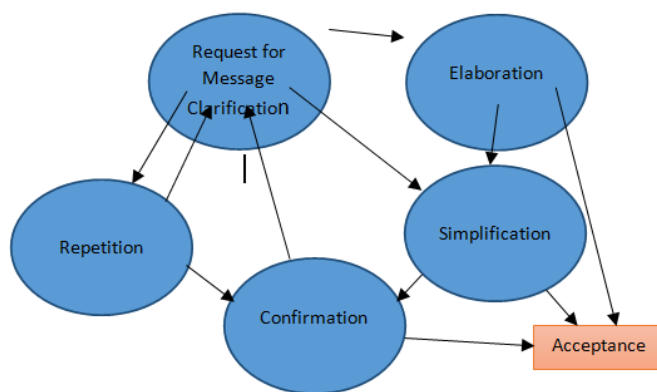
Student 16 simplified his expression by just providing a synonym of *residence*, the word which the listener was not familiar with. It was such a lexical simplification. Meanwhile, student 2 simplified his expression by changing its structure; from a passive into a nominal sentence. Indisputably, the findings imply that there are two basic types of simplification which EFL learners can use in their speaking performances; lexical and structural simplification. Using lexical simplification means just providing synonyms of the words which the listener is not familiar with. Meanwhile, employing structural or grammatical simplification deals with providing a structurally simpler version of the sentence which sounds too complicated for the listener to understand.

Effects of the Students’ Negotiations of Meaning on their Speaking Performances

The two speaking tasks given by the lecturer in the EFL classroom encouraged the students to show their best speaking performances despite their relatively low level of English, resulting in so lively classroom interactions among the students. Many questions were asked and answered, and many ideas were shared, accepted and rejected. It is not an overstatement to say that the students’ use of negotiations of meaning contributed a lot to the gratifying atmosphere.

The findings disclose that in many occasions if the EFL classroom, one negotiation of meaning performed by a student stimulated another, forming an adjacency pair. In other words, those negotiations of meaning mostly interacted with each other as seen in the below figure.

Figure 2. *Effects of the Students’ Negotiations of Meaning on their Speaking Performances*



The above figure illustrates that of the five negotiation of meaning strategies used by the students in their speaking performances in the EFL classroom, only three resulted in acceptance; confirmation, elaboration and simplification. Interestingly, in many occasions in the EFL classroom, the use of one strategy triggered that of another. As we have seen, request for message clarification caused repetition, elaboration and simplification; confirmation stimulated request for message clarification; repetition led to request for message clarification and confirmation; elaboration triggered simplification; and simplification resulted in confirmation.

The students’ use of request for message clarification was intended to ask the speaker to just repeat his or her utterance in clear pronunciation, to encourage the speaker to give more information about what he or she had said and to imply disagreement. It is really interesting that the students’ use of this strategy resulted in three effects; repetition, simplification and elaboration. The first effect seems to just go along with the first purpose; when the speaker was wanted to repeat his or her statement in clear pronunciation, there was nothing that the speaker could do but a repetition. Meanwhile, the second and third effect seemed to match the second purpose; when the request for message clarification was to urge the speaker to provide more information about what he or she had said, both simplification and elaboration were what came as the result.

The students’ negotiations of meaning through confirmation strategy were simply to ensure whether they did not misunderstand what they heard from the speaker. The students’ use of this strategy in their speaking performances in the EFL classroom resulted in two responses as its effects; acceptance and request for message clarification. The acceptances were mostly expressed through “yes”. Meanwhile, the occurrence of request for message clarification as another effect was mostly due to the students’ inaccurate utterances when trying to confirm what they heard from the speaker. Thus, it can be claimed that how the simple acceptance expression (“yes”) and request for message clarification came as the effects of confirmation was greatly influenced by the students’ relatively low level of English. If the students had had higher level of English, there would have been various acceptance expressions implying “yes” and less requests for message clarification occurring as the effects of the students’ use of confirmation strategy in the

EFL classroom.

The students' employments of repetition in their speaking performances in the EFL classroom were to highlight important parts of what they said and to commence giving a supporting idea. Uniquely, what came after the use of this strategy was confirmation and request for message clarification. This obviously implies that the students' negotiation of meaning through repetition strategy did not directly make their ideas understandable. Once again, it was the students' relatively low level of English which created the "abnormality".

The students' use of elaboration strategy in their speaking performances had two purposes; to help the listeners understand the ideas expressed and to defend an opinion, and what occurred as its result was acceptance and simplification. The first result, acceptance, seems so standard since an elaboration ideally makes an idea understandable and acceptable. Meanwhile, the second seems so unbelievable. It is just amazing that in an EFL classroom dominated by students with relatively low level of English, some elaborations could meet a simplification. In one moment in the EFL classroom, for instance, the speaker elaborated on her idea by saying "*I am I am very useful thing. I am pieces of paper. I have very much knowledge, and I am over the world. You can buy me and also you can borrow me*", and a listener concluded the elaboration by uttering "*Um you is a book*", which was obviously a simplification of the speaker's elaboration. From here, we can see that a speaker's elaboration can be concluded by a listener's simplification. The last negotiation of meaning strategy used by the students in their speaking performances in the EFL classroom was simplification. They employed this strategy just to help the listeners understand what they were talking about, and what occurred as its effect was acceptance and confirmation. This does imply that the students' use of this strategy in their speaking performances managed to reach its target.

V. CONCLUSION

A second or foreign language can be acquired effectively through meaningful interactions in verbal communication in the target language (Krashen, 2001), therefore, EFL learners are supposed to get used to practicing their English in real situations for significant progress in the learning process. The research findings do imply that even EFL learners of basic level can already build and maintain verbal communications among them despite their limitations, and it all can happen to some extent because of their use of negotiations of meaning. Those negotiations of meaning are essentially communicative tools that enable EFL learners, particularly those with still low level of English, to maintain interactive communications among them. More practically, they employ those negotiations of meaning as communication strategies to overcome communicative problems occurring among them. Conclusively, it can be inferred that the use of negotiations of meaning plays an important role in the EFL learning process.

The findings propose that the use of negotiation of meaning is unavoidable in real practices of using English as a foreign language. In fact, it is an effective strategy that an EFL student can use to get actively engaged in the practices. For this reason, EFL students are supposed to improve their knowledge of negotiation of meaning in order to be able to apply it effectively in real situations. EFL teachers can facilitate the students' effort by providing them with speaking tasks which encourage them to practice solving communicative problems occurring among them through negotiation of meaning.

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