

# CONVERSATIONAL INTERACTION AND NEGOTIATION OF MEANING IN TASK-BASED GROUP INTERACTION AMONG NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS

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## ABSTRACT

*English plays a crucial role as the working and indispensable language of ASEAN. Sketching the typology of situations and participants' features of interaction, when English is used as a lingua franca is valuable for global citizens. This qualitative study was aimed at investigating lingual Franca interaction and negotiation of meaning among international learners of EFL in English interactions. Five undergraduate students were involved in this study. The recording of the interactions of the focus group was for qualitative data. The recording was transcribed and analyzed by content analysis. The result of the study illustrates substantially produced language including negotiation of meaning. The particular vocabulary, pronunciation and the complexity of the task were found to be the triggers activating the other forms of negotiation of meaning. In addition, learners made use of repair mechanism rather than preventing conversational trouble to conquer communication breakdown. Among the repair strategy, clarification requests gained the biggest portion of the others. The study also reveals that learners' language features of meaning negotiation indicated the interferences from their mother tongues*

**Keywords:** negotiation of meaning, lingual Franca, group interaction

## INTRODUCTION

To dates, in the globalized world, international business trade has been the core channel to get international people with their diversities together for a particular reason. Communication, no matter in what way it operates, is the main mean to get a job done. English is widely used as a communicating tool as it is considered to be a world language. According to the world research, English has become the primary language of the world due to its significance development of this 21st century and the ever-increasing number of people who learn it as a second or foreign language.

Currently, it seems clear that non-native speaker to non-native speaker communication is far more common than native speaker to native speaker or non-native speaker to native speaker communication. More, an analysis of international business has shown that 85% of all business operation is among ,on-English speaking countries (Graddol, 2006, Willis 1996). As a result, English used as a lingua franca (ELF) is by far the most common form of English in the world today (Jenkins, 2003., Graddol, 2006., El-Sharkawy, 2007). As regional trade grows, encouraged by ASEAN, English is becoming an ever more valuable and significant lingua franca in Asia. By the year 2040, according to the research, nearly a third of the world's population will be speaking English. The increasing response to ELF worldwide, results in the current situation, which caters more to the dimensions of English as an international language rather traditional English as a foreign language (Graddol, 2006). It is certain that language and culture will never be separated. People using English come up with the variety of cultural backgrounds with different accents with may cause communicative

misunderstanding or conflicts. Albl-Mikasa (2008) found in his study that comprehension problems from the non-native speakers have been found to be the major trouble source to mutual understanding. The non-standard English often comes with intended first language expressions with unusual word combination and interferences from their mother tongue which in turns impede the actual meaning of the conveying message (Basel, 2002 ). As English used as a lingua franca characteristically demonstrates itself in spoken language, the accent is one of the evident areas of its diversity. Advocates of ELF see that the variation in accent is acceptable as far as intelligibility and conversation flow are secured. However, the interlocutors are required accommodation skills together with cultural sensitivity since the variety of these English accents are unfamiliar to them (Alptekin, 2002.)

Lingua franca conversation as an interaction among non-native-non-native learners is an increasingly important area in language learning research. The basic finding illustrates the cooperation of communication. However, there is not much research focusing on interactional features of negotiation of meaning, which critical for successful interactions. This paper is concerned with non-native speaker-non-native speaker group interactions. The focus falls on the negotiation of meaning with the interactional discourse using English lingua franca.

According to the world situation of the increase of English use among non-native speakers of English, it is worth to research the non-native speakers' interaction to see if those interactions contain any language features that facilitate the communication and if there are any language features of meaning negotiation that indicate the interferences from their mother tongues. A case study of four learners was conducted to explore the questions.

## **NEGOTIATION OF MEANING**

Negotiation of meaning refers to a process in which a listener requests the message to be clarified and confirmed, and the speaker gives responses to those requests often via repetition, elaboration or language simplification. The discourse strategies often used for negotiation for meaning are clarification requests, confirmation checks, repetitions and reformulations or recasts (Pica, 1994). Regarding communication, the process of negotiation for meaning functions as both a means to prevent conversational trouble and repair mechanism to conquer communication breakdown. Long (1983) added that negotiation for meaning may include obvious attempts to prevent communication breakdown. Alternatively, other researchers have located their models on conversational adjustments including confirmation checks, clarification requests and comprehension checks. The negotiation of meaning has been categorized as attempts to prevent communication breakdown and repair (Long, 1983b; Long & Porter, 1985; Porter, 1986; Young, 1984 cited in Oliver, 2002), which has also been classified as clarification request, comprehension check and confirmation check. Clarification request has been defined by some proponents as any expressions a speaker elicits clarification of the interlocutor's preceding utterance(s) to help in understanding something the interlocutor said (Gass et al., 2005).

Comprehension check has been defined as any expressions elicited by the speaker to check whether the interlocutor(s) have understood the previous speaker utterance(s). Confirmation check has been defined as any expressions a speaker elicit after the interlocutor's utterance(s) to confirm that the utterance has been correctly heard or understood by the speaker (Gass et al., 2005). Regarding communication, the process of negotiation for meaning functions as both a means to prevent conversational trouble and repair mechanism to conquer communication breakdown (Oliver, 2002). Long (1983) added that negotiation for meaning may include explicit attempts to prevent communication breakdown. Alternatively, other

researchers have located their models on conversational adjustments including confirmation checks, clarification requests and comprehension checks (Doughty & Pica, 1986; Long, 1981; Long & Sato, 1983; Oliver, 1998, cited in Oliver, 2002).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study investigates interactional routines occur in the task-based medium. The non-native-non-native group interaction would be expected to provide the fruitful insights into interactional adjustments including the negotiation of meaning types used by the interlocutors that occur when communication difficulties arise. Moreover, the study aims to explore if there are any language features of meaning negotiation that indicate the interferences from their mother tongues.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were the international participants who were fourth-year international undergraduate students at Chiang Mai Rajabhat University. All of them are non-native speakers of English and were enrolled in a fourth-year course on English for Tourism 3 at a time this study took place.

### **Task**

The task as a mean in this study is information gap task (closed task), which is believed to promote learners' negotiation of meaning (Nunan, 2004). Each member of a group has a task sheet with different information, and they need to share or discuss the information he/she has to complete his or her task. The content of the task concerns food and travel, which should be one of the topics in the tourism industry. The study focuses on the focus group of interaction during their work in collaboration.

### **Procedures**

25 learners enrolled the course, and they were randomly assigned to one of the five groups. However, this study focused on a focus group of 5 subjects participated for the data analysis. The recording of the interactions of the focus group was administered while carrying out the information-gap tasks to obtain in-depth qualitative data concerning students' interactions in collaborative group work. The recording was transcribed, coded and analyzed by content analysis. The transcribed and coded data have been examined by the learners for the validity.

In the previous class, students had studied the negotiation of meaning, its significances, and language features so that they would be able to make use of them during their task performances. The written instructions explained to students that they had different information that the rest of the groups did not. As the result, they were required to complete the gaps in their task sheets, so they were asked to share, discuss, inform or exchange their information to get the job done. They had thirty minutes to finish the assigned task.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The results of the study show substantially produced language, language modification and negotiation of meaning. The followings illustrate excerpts and comments on each particular routine in the context of NNS group interaction through task medium.

### **Interactional features occurred in non-native learner to non-native learner task-based group interaction**

There is a total of 82 negotiation episodes found in the conversational script of 377 running words. In each conversation episode, its major part is repairs with clarification requests. The Table 1 below illustrates the total number of running words and negotiation of meaning turns.

Out of 377 total turns, 82 turns or 21.75% were negotiated turns. Obviously, two turns or 0.53% have been found as preventing communication break down while 80 turns of repairs or 21.22% have been found. Regarding repairs, 32 clarification requests or 40 % have been found. For another emerging interactional features of repairs, 29 confirmation checks or 36.25 % and 19 comprehension checks or 23.75% have been found respectively. Table 1 illustrates interactional features occurred in non-native learner to non-native learner task-based group interaction.

**Table 1. Interactional features**

<i>Negotiation of meaning types</i>	<i>Number of turns</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Number of preventing communication break	2	0.53%
Number of repairs	80	21.22%
Clarification requests	32	40 %
Confirmation checks	29	36.25 %
Comprehension check	19	23.75%

**Triggers of non-understanding in learners’ interactional conversation**

The analysis result of learners’ interactions indicates three main types of triggers: lexicon, pronunciation and Content task complexity. Those three categories indicate non-understanding, which illustrates negotiation of meaning episode. Among non-native group learners in EFL context, vocabulary difficulty is clearly shown to take a big part of them. Table 2 below presents the types of trigger occurred in learners’ interaction

**Table 2. Trigger types**

<i>Trigger types</i>	<i>Episode number</i>	<i>Mean percentage of Episodes</i>
Lexicon	21	56.75%
Pronunciation	5	13.51 %
Content task complexity	11	29.72 %
Total	37	99.98 %

**Lexicon**

The assigned task contained vocabulary related to Thai dish, which may seem to be unfamiliar to the participants and they needed to convey their message to the group members to finish the assigned task sheet with the required information. As a result, the particular lexicons or vocabulary was the trigger activating the other forms of negotiation of meaning as can be observed in the following sample of the excerpts.

Excerpt 1:

1. Cambodian: And for the kitchen utensils, we want...we need...is a wok and the second...
2. (Everyone looked puzzled pointing their eyes to the speaker)

3. Thai: What was the first one, can you....describe it?
4. Cambodian:: It's like, er.... It's like a pan but it has two..... er... hands.
5. Chinese 1: It's like a pan ?..... (looking at a Cambodian)
6. Chinese 3: A pan.... p-a-n.
7. Chinese 2: Er...er..(with hand rising)
8. Chinese 1: What's it for?
9. Cambodian: It's ... it's made for..er.. fry or for....
10. Chinese 1: Oh... (nodding her head)

From the above excerpt, the speaker (Cambodian) (line 1) produced an utterance with an unfamiliar word “wok”, which triggered the listeners to extend a signal for negotiation of meaning in a form of clarification requests of both nonverbal and verbal signals (line 2 and line 3). Consequently, the response by the speaker (Cambodian) was done when he modified the term adding more explanation (line 4) followed by Chinese1's confirmation check (line 5) and another clarification request (line 8). In the meantime, Chinese 3 murmured the word to herself (line 6), and this infers that she was about to make a confirmation while and Chinese 2 made an exclamation “Er..Er..” to make a clarification request.

### **Pronunciation**

It has been found from this study that English pronunciation with L1 accent was one of the triggers calling for negotiation for meaning. From the excerpt two below, Chinese 2 meant to say “stove” and “medium” but she pronounced it as “store” and “medel” so the Thai learner asked her to clarify the words (line 2). The Cambodian, who saw the context from the task sheet also made the clarification request for the word “medel” (line 5), followed by the immediate feedback from the other Chinese (Chinese 3) to confirm the problematic word (line 6).

Excerpt 2:

1. Chinese2: the first one is.. turn, turn the store( Stove) to medel ( medium) heat
2. Thai: You mean “Turn the stove?” (correct pronunciation)
3. Chinese2: Yes, stove (correct pronunciation)
4. Chinese2: to the medel heat
5. Cambodian: Medium or what ? (correct pronunciation)
6. Chinese3: Medium oh yer,

### **Content complexity**

The assigned task was the information gap task. The task was quite complex. The member who was going to convey the message got the exact written description with a picture for each piece of item. Conversely, the others got only several similar pictures, and they needed to select the correct picture, which was relevant to the information told. Each part of the task sheet contained quite many items as well.

As seen in excerpt 3 below, the complexity of the task content forced the other two listeners to extend the signal for negotiation of meaning in a form of confirmation check (Chinese 2: line 3 and Chinese 1: line 7 and 8) and clarification request (Chinese 3:line 4 and Chinese2: line 5 ) as they wanted to get the right picture among the four different pictures with different garlic forms and numbers.

Excerpt 3:

1. Cambodian: Yer. Anything else?
2. Thai: Yes of course. Of course we need four cloves of garlic
3. Chinese 2: One ? (raised her one finger)
4. Chinese 3: Only garlic?
5. Chinese 2: But we have two garlic
6. Thai: We need four garlic.... **four** cloves of garlic
7. Chinese 1: Number four... oh.....
8. Chinese 1: Garlic and we have to use knife
9. Thai: Yes of course

### Indicators learners used to indicate the non-understanding source

Interestingly, the analysis also finds a variety of indicator types learners used to indicate the non-understanding source by clarification requests, comprehension checks and confirmation checks as shown in Table 3 below.

**Table 3. Indicator types**

<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Verbal language</i>	<i>Nonverbal language</i>	<i>Both verbal and nonverbal language</i>
Clarification requests	20 (62.5%)	7 (21.87%)	5 (15.62%)
Confirmation checks	23 (79.31%)	-	6 (20.68%)
Comprehension checks	19 (100%)	-	-
Total	62 (77.5%)	7 (8.75%)	11 (13.75%)

From Table 3, learners used mostly verbal language to make clarification requests (62.5%). They used some non-verbal language (21.87%) and both verbal and nonverbal language (15.62%) to make the request for clarification. For confirmation checks, learners mostly used verbal language to make confirmation checks (79.31%) while they hardly used both verbal and nonverbal language (20.68%). Regarding comprehension checks, learners only made use of verbal language (100%). Overall, learners made use of verbal language (77.5%) the most, followed by both verbal and nonverbal language (13.75%) and nonverbal language alone (8.75%) respectively.

**Table 4. Verbal language features use**

<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Questions</i>	<i>Word repetition with rising tone</i>	<i>Exclamation</i>	<i>Negative sentences</i>
Clarification requests	13 (54.16%)	3 (12.5%)	6 (25%)	2 (8.33%)
Confirmation checks	9 (39.13%)	14 (60.86%)	-	-
Comprehension checks	19 (100%)	-	-	-
Total	41 (62.12%)	17 (25.75%)	6 (9.09%)	2 (3.03%)

Table 4 illustrates that participants made use of questions (54.16%), exclamation (25%), word repetition with rising tone (12.5%) and negative sentence (8.33%) respectively to make clarification requests. Regarding confirmation checks, learners made use of word repetition

with rising tone (60.86%) and questions (39.13%) respectively. For comprehension checks, they only used questions (100%).

It is noticeable that non-native speakers of English made use of to word repetition with rising tone and exclamation in a higher percentage (34.84%) to negotiate for meaning. They also used the negative sentences to make clarification requests. The negative sentence they used was “ I don’t know”.

**Table 5. Nonverbal language use**

<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Hand movement</i>	<i>Head movement</i>	<i>Facial expression</i>
Clarification requests	2 (14.28%)	1 (7.14%)	5 (35.71%)
Confirmation checks	4 (28.57%)	1 (7.14%)	1 (7.14%)
Total	6 (42.58%)	2 (14.28%)	6 (42.58%)

Table 5 shows that learners made use of the non-verbal language of facial expression for clarification requests with the high percentage (35.71%) followed by the non-verbal language of hand movement (14.28%) and head movement (7.14%) respectively. However, they used the non-verbal of hand movement along with their verbal ones. Regarding confirmation checks, four times of hand movement (28.57%) were used and once each for the utilization of the facial expression (7.14%) and head movement (7.14%) along with their verbal languages.

### Non-verbal language and exclamation language features

The study results illustrate non-verbal language and exclamation language features in learners’ interactional conversation by task-based medium of group interaction as shown in the table below.

**Table 6. Non-verbal language and exclamation language features**

Indicators	Non-verbal language	Exclamation
Clarification requests	A gesture of rising a hand	“ Hue?”,
	Leaning head towards the interlocutor	“ Ha ?”
	Looking at the interlocutor with puzzle eyes	“Er....er..”
	Head movement	“You.....”,
Confirmation checks	Hand movement	“ Deaw.. deaw”(Thai) (wait and explain)
	(Object drawing and number indication)	
	Head nod	

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of Table 5 and 6 illustrates that non-verbal communication does not play less role in communication among non-native speakers in the study. Learners made use of facial

expression and, hand and head movement to request for clarification. They even used some words of their mother tongues to facilitate their interactions. These “World Englishes” inevitably come with local linguistic and cultural influences affecting the way such English is spoken in its L2 locations regarding accents, structures, lexis, pragmatic features, etc. (Jenkins, 2003).

This finding suggests that it can be inferred that language and culture will never be separated. Some distinguishing features have found in this study. The results of the study revealed that participants produced a large number of negotiation of meaning features while carrying out their tasks. However, the negotiation of meaning they applied deviated from the learnt standard negotiation of meaning language features. It could be noted that the negotiation of meaning features they produced, such as “ Hue?” , “ Ha ?” , “ Er.....”. “You.....”, “Er....er..”, the native language or a gesture of rising a hand, or leaning their face towards the interlocutor deviate from the features like, “ Could you repeat that?”, “ Sorry, but I don’t understand”, “ What is....?”, “ Do what?”, “ Blue?”, “ You mean this picture?”, “ You know what I mean?”, “Clear?”, “Does that make sense?” as shown in Table 7 above.

## **CONCLUSION**

Since the world is open with regional and global trade grows, it is crucial to know that people from different cultures are different in a variety of ways, including different ways of interacting with other persons. In this study, certain communication gap-filling tasks on the way in which international EFL learners, Cambodian, Chinese and Thai students, in group interaction, mainly repaired communication problems rather than preventing communication breakdown. The study also indicates that lexicon and task complexity played the big roles as the variables to affect the amount of negotiated repairs. The learners’ negotiation of meaning, which is necessary for effective communication to get the job done, turns out to deviate from the collective negotiation of meanings often used by the native speakers of English. The mentioned language features of meaning negotiation indicate the interferences from the learners’ mother tongues.

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