The Effectiveness of Negotiation of Meaning Strategies on Developing Grammar Usage in Two-way Communication Tasks

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Abstract

This article investigates the effectiveness of negotiation of meaning strategies on developing grammar usage of English language learners in two-way communication tasks. Thai freshmen students majoring English (n=30) participated in a 12-week of Listening and Speaking 1 course in 2011 academic year. The participants were placed into three groups with different English proficiency levels according to their English placement scores: high, mid and low proficiency groups. They were trained to use five types of negotiation of meaning strategies before taking part in three kinds of two-way communication tasks which consisted of problem-solving task, information-gap task and story- telling task. While performing the tasks, the participants' conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed to analyze their negotiation of meaning strategies production as well as their grammar usage. The findings showed that negotiation of meaning strategies were facilitative in enhancing students' grammatical development. After using the negotiation of meaning strategies, the students' grammar usage was improved in each type of tasks, especially in tenses.

Keywords: Negotiation of meaning strategies / Two-way communication tasks

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บทคัดย่อ

      การศึกษาครั้งนี้มุ่งศึกษาประสิทธิผลของการใช้กลวิธีต่อรองความหมาย ใน กิจกรรมการสื่อสารแบบสองทางต่อความสามารถในการใช้ไวยากรณ์ของนักศึกษาชั้นปี ที่ 1 วิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษ จำนวน 30 คน ที่ลงทะเบียนเรียนในรายวิชา Listening and Speaking 1 ภาคเรียนที่ 1 ปีการศึกษา 2554 มหาวิทยาลัยแม่ฟ้าหลวง จังหวัดเชียงราย ผู้วิจัยแบ่งกลุ่มผู้เรียนออกเป็น 3 กลุ่ม คือ กลุ่มเก่ง กลุ่มปานกลาง และกลุ่มอ่อน ตาม คะแนน ที่ได้จากแบบทดสอบวัดระดับความสามารถทางภาษาอังกฤษ (English Placement test) ผู้วิจัยทำการฝึกผู้เรียนในการใช้กลวิธีต่อรองความหมาย จำนวน 5 ประเภท ได้แก่ Comprehension Check, Confirmation Check, Clarification Request, Appeals for Help และ Repetition หลังจากเสร็จสิ้นการฝึก ให้ผู้เรียนจับคู่สนทนาใน กิจกรรมการสื่อสารแบบสองทาง ได้แก่ กิจกรรมการแก้ปัญหา กิจกรรมการหาข้อมูลที่ ขาดหาย และกิจกรรมการเล่าเรื่องเป็นเวลา 12 สัปดาห์ ในระหว่างที่ดำเนินกิจกรรมการ สื่อสารแบบสองทาง มีการบันทึกเสียงการสนทนาของผู้เรียนในทุกกิจกรรม หลังจากนั้น จึงนำข้อมูลที่ได้ไป ถอดเสียง และวิเคราะห์การใช้กลวิธีต่อรองความหมาย รวมทั้ง ความสามารถด้านการใช้ไวยากรณ์ของผู้เรียน ผลการวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นว่า การใช้กลวิธี ต่อรองความหมายในกิจกรรม การสื่อสารแบบสองทาง ช่วยพัฒนาประสิทธิผลในการใช้ ไวยากรณ์ของผู้เรียนได้ถูกต้องเพิ่มขึ้น โดยพบว่าความสามารถด้านไวยากรณ์ของผู้เรียน พัฒนาขึ้นในกิจกรรมแต่ละประเภท โดยเฉพาะด้าน Tenses

คำสำคัญ: กลวิธีต่อรองความหมาย / กิจกรรมการสื่อสารแบบสองทาง

Introduction

      In developing learners' communication skill, communication task is considered a crucial element of English language teaching especially communication task. Nunan (1989, cited in Ellis, 1997) has defined

communication tasks as tasks that involve learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. In this meaning, it is assumed that natural processes happening inside the learner's mind are responsible for language learning and that the teachers cannot control these processes directly (Howart, 1984 cited in Klapper, 2003). Instead, the teacher's role is to help learners acquire language fluency through activities and language samples, not to teach grammar or correct their mistakes. Therefore, communication tasks in the classroom can create opportunities for the language learners to use target language and develop their linguistic competence.

Another key role for successful communication is negotiation of meaning. It is the process in which the learner and the interlocutor provide and interpret the utterance carried by the learner or their interlocutor, or the input, which provokes adjustments to linguistic forms, conversational structure or message content until they reach mutual understanding (Gass & Mackey, 2006). In Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1983), he contended that input is important factor for language acquisition; however, modified interaction is the necessary mechanism for making language comprehensible, as it allows learners to adjust or modify their less comprehensible message and make them understood to the interlocutors which facilitates their language acquisition (Long, 1996). The strategies for meaning negotiation used during interaction included different kind of questions asked by the interlocutors in order to facilitate L2 acquisition; for example, confirmation checks (Is this what you mean?), comprehension checks (Do you understand?), or clarification requests

(What? Huh?) (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

A number of studies on modified interaction or negotiation for meaning (e.g., Gass & Varonis, 1985b; Long, 1983a, 1983b; Pica & Doughty, 1985a cited in Oliver, 2002) suggested that the process of negotiating for meaning is facilitative of L21 acquisition. It is facilitative because it provides language learners with three elements crucial for L2 acquisition success—namely comprehensible input, comprehensible output, and feedback. Accordingly, in achieving communication skill, one important criteria is that "there must be strategies for meaning negotiation between the speakers, i.e. the learner must be involved in interpreting a meaning from what they hear and constructing what to say, not reliant on the teacher or textbook to provide the language" (Hedge, 1993).

In addition, negotiation of meaning strategy is viewed as a vehicle to language proficiency. As it has been described as leading language learners to greater awareness of their language and to further development of language proficiency (Ko, Schallert & Walters, 2003). Many studies have shown that negotiation of meaning strategies can enhance learners' fluency. As in Sommat's (2007), which observed the effects of the patterns of negotiation of meaning strategies on the English language used in communicative information gap tasks by Thai lower secondary school students. The results suggested that the negotiation of meaning strategies used in the "Spot the Differences" tasks were effective in promoting students' oral English communicative competence. Also, Nakahama's study (2001) suggested that conversational interaction has the potential to offer substantial learning opportunities at multiple levels. Similarly, Ko et al. (2003) showed that 11 out of 21 students gained higher

mean scores on their second storytelling task following the negotiation of meaning session; or the question and answer session, in which the teacher and student peers interacted with the storytellers, though the mean scores were not significantly different. Therefore, negotiation of meaning used as a strategy (Long, 1983) in conversational interactions is effective for developing the learners' oral English communicative competence.

However, communication tasks which contribute to opportunities for negotiation of meaning, have long been controversial. Long (1980) has introduced two task types; a one-way task and a two-way task. In one-way task one person holds all the information; while in two-way tasks, all have equal but partially shared information which they must exchange to get all the information (Newton et al., 1996). Gass and Varonis (1985) argue that one-way tasks create more opportunities for negotiation of meaning. While Newton et al. (1996) claim that two-way tasks create more strategies for meaning negotiation than one-way task. Furthermore, many studies affirmed that language learners negotiate for meaning in two-way tasks rather than one-way tasks (Doughty & Pica's, 1986; Long, 1983; Newton et al., 1996; Foster, 1998; Eckerth, 2009)

Long (1983) proposed that a two-way communication task provides more comprehensible input than one-way tasks as it involves an exchange of information, which enhance the language learners acquisition through modified interaction as presented figure 1 below:
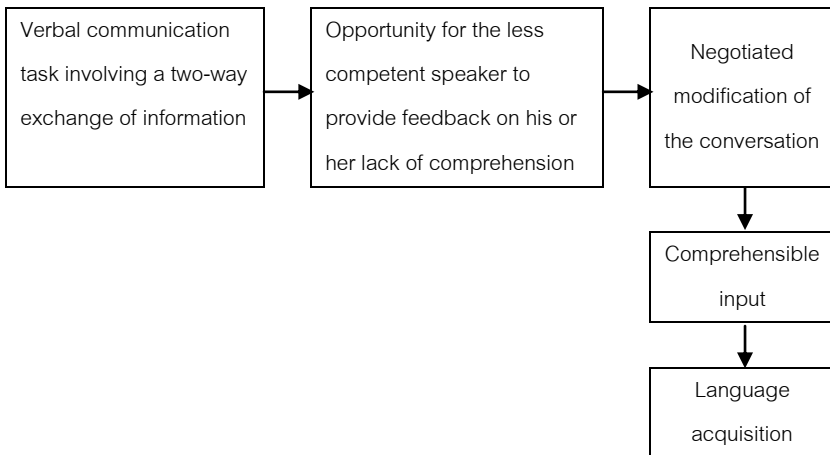
Figure 1   Long's model of the relationship between type of conversational task and language acquisition.

However, most of the two-way communication tasks conducted in many studies used a certain kind of tasks such as a jigsaw task (Sato & Lyster, 2007), a picture description task or jigsaw task (Trofimovich et al., 2007; Sato & Lyster, 2007), a spot-the-difference task (Gass & Lewis, 2007), but in this study, three types of two-way communication tasks were selected: problem-solving tasks, information-gap tasks and story-telling tasks. As these tasks were widely used and found effectively engage students' interaction. Also unlike other studies where pre- test, post-test were employed to assess learners' oral proficiency skill, an authentic assessment was used to assess the EFL learners' oral proficiency throughout the study.

Besides, few studies have been undertaken about how interaction contributes to the development of L2 grammar as they require longitudinal study (Ellis, 1999). A study conducted by Takashima and Ellis (1999)

investigating the effects of focused feedback on learners' use and acquisition of past tense forms, and the result showed that focused feedback resulted in learners self- correcting past tense forms 29% of the time which means feedback has a direct impact on L2 acquisition. In this study, three areas of grammatical features were investigated: plural formation, tense inflection and determiners. These features are proved to be problematic to the language learners (Bardovi-Harlig & Bofman, 1989 cited in Ellis, 1997). It's expected that negotiation of meaning in conversational interaction will enhance the learners' grammatical development.

Mae Fah Luang University is an autonomous university in the north of Thailand where English is used as a medium of instruction. Thus, negotiation of meaning strategies should enhance their language acquisition in terms of both fluency and accuracy. The goal of English language teaching should enhance the students' abilities to communicate in English language effectively.

Methods

Research Questions

1. What types of negotiation of meaning strategies (i.e. comprehension check, confirmation check, clarification checks, appeals for help and repetition) were produced by EFL learners at different language proficiency in two-way communication tasks?

2. What are the effects of the negotiation of meaning strategies in two-way communication tasks on gram- mar usage of 3 groups of students with different language proficiency?

Participants

The participants were 30 first year English major students (male 10, female 20) enrolling in Listening and Speaking I Course at Mae Fah Luang University, an autonomous university in Thailand in 2010 academic year. Each participant had completed at a minimum of 8 years of English study prior to entering the university. Their ages ranged from 17 to 19. They were placed into three different oral proficiency levels: high, mid, and low. High- proficiency level of English was determined at $\geq$ 50 (out of 80), and mid-proficiency level was determined between 30-50, and low-proficiency level was determined below 30.

Negotiation of Meaning strategies training

In the study, participants were divided into three groups of English proficiency levels; high, mid, and low. They received an explicit training of negotiation of meaning strategies at the pre-teaching and while-teaching stages. At the initial period, they were introduced about the strategies, and at the beginning of each two-way communication task, they were reminded of the strategies uses.

The five types of negotiation of meaning strategies as described by Long (1980, 1983a) and Pica and Doughty (1985a) were the basis of the study; they were comprehension check, confirmation check, clarification requests, appealing for help, and repetition.

1. Comprehension check: these are made by the speaker to check if the preceding utterance has been correctly understood by the listener. They usually consist of questions, either tag questions, repetition with rising

intonation, or questions or any expression established whether the message is understood by the addressee, such as:

     a. Do you understand?

     b. You know what I mean?

     c. Do you get it?

    2. Confirmation checks: these are made by the listener to establish that the preceding utterance has been heard and understood correctly. They include repetition ac- companied by rising intonation any expression that the speaker would like to make sure that it is understood, as in

     A: I was chuffled.

     B: You were pleased? A: Yes.

    3. Clarification requests: these are made by the listener to clarify what the speaker has said and include statements such as "I don't understand," wh-questions, yes/ no questions, and tag questions or any expressions that elicits clarification of the utterance such as

     d. What?

     e. Huh?

     f. Uh?

    4. Appealing for help: any expression that shows that the speaker has trouble such as

     g. Could you say it again?

     h. Pardon me?

    5. Repetition: these include the speaker's partial, exact, or expanded repetitions of lexical items from his or her own preceding utterances.

Two-way Communication Tasks

Brumfit (1984 in Hedge 1993) defines the aim of communication in the classroom as to "develop a pattern of language interaction within the classroom which is as close as possible to that used by competent performers in the mother tongue in normal life". In his discussion, Brumfit (1984 in Ellis 1997) claimed that communication tasks will help develop learners' communication skills and they will contribute incidentally to their linguistic development. That means, communication tasks aid fluency by enabling learners to activate their linguistic knowledge for use in natural and spontaneous language use, such as when taking part in conversation. Therefore, communication tasks in the classroom can create opportunities for the language learners to use target language and develop their linguistic competence, especially two-way communication tasks.

Two-way tasks were claimed to be facilitative in triggering the production of strategies for meaning negotiation. According to Doughty and Pica (1986), a two-way task, a task in which both participants have shared information in order to complete a task, encourages the speakers to produce more negotiation of meaning. Additionally, two-way tasks provide an opportunity not only to produce the target language, but also through conversational adjustments, to manipulate and modify it (Gass & Varonis 1985). The two-way communication tasks in this study comprised of problem-solving tasks, information gap task and storytelling task,.

Problem-solving task

Problem-solving task is considered as a two-way task in the study. As defined by Willis (1996), problem-solving tasks involve a more intellectual and

analytical skill from learners. In addition, a two-way problem-solving task is designed to encourage co-operation and conversational negotiation. In this study, there were three problem-solving tasks where participants were presented with real-life problems and have to discuss to agree to a solution. For example, participants discussed their personal problems to find solutions, or giving them a situation in which they exchanged their opinions or make a decision.

Information gap task

Information gap is a task that involves conveying or requesting information from the pair or group members (Brown, 2001). There are two important characteristics in information gap task. One is that the focus is on the information and not on language forms. Two is that it requires communicative interaction to reach the goal. The information gap task was widely used among researchers in interaction and claimed to contribute to interaction research methodology (Pica, Kang, & Sauro, 2006). This task has been found to generate more opportunities for the interactants to negotiate than do tasks that do not require a convergent outcome, such as opinion exchange and free conversation. In this study, there were three information gap tasks in which the participants were required to restore portions of incomplete passages, and or they were given a person's picture and they had to describe the person as well as asking for information of their friend's picture.

Story-telling Task

The story-telling task is considered as two-way task which provides rich possibilities for students to learn from one another and share experiences while receiving important practice in using their English skills (Ko et al., 2003).

During the task, the students were required to tell a 4-5 minute personal narrative about an embarrassing, exciting, sad or funny event that had ever happened to them, then the students told their stories to their peers.

Data Collection Procedures

There were 7 high proficiency students, 16 mid proficiency students, and 7 high proficiency students. They received an explicit training of negotiation of meaning strategies prior to engaging in two-way communication tasks instruction.

During each two-way communication task, the participants consisted of 15 dyads and each dyad was randomly assigned to form either high-high, mid-mid, low-low, high-low, high-mid, mid-low. The students received the training session of negotiation of meaning strategies at the beginning of each task and engaged in three types of two-way communication tasks for a period of 12 weeks.

During their interactions, their conversations were audio- recorded. The researcher as an instructor and her research assistant observed the class. In addition, the focused group was carried out at the end of the study to obtain the students' perspectives on the effectiveness of the negotiation of meaning strategies. The transcriptions were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively and the negotiation strategies used to negotiate for meaning were identified as well as the students' grammar usage.

Data Analysis

The present study was a quasi-experimental, one group design. The data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively in order to identify the occurrence of negotiation of meaning strategies, as well as the grammatical

development while they were performing two-way communication tasks.

The quantitative data analysis was obtained from the transcription of the participants' interaction in the two-way communication tasks in order to investigate the occurrence of strategies for meaning negotiation during interaction. The frequency of negotiation of meaning strategies used by the participants in different language proficiency levels was measured and coded according to the coding scheme. The coding scheme for five types of interactional features was drawn from the interactional analysis in L2/ FL acquisition research (Doughty & Pica, 1986; Long, 1983; Foster, 1998):

1. Comprehension Checks (CPC)
2. Clarification Requests (CFR)
3. Confirmation Checks (CFC)
4. Appeals for Help (AFH)
5. Repetition (REP)

The students' oral proficiency was analyzed by using descriptive statistics. The qualitative data analysis was obtained to counterbalance the quantitative data from the focus group which helped the researcher to gain more insight perspectives on the effectiveness of negotiation of meaning strategies among the students.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: The production of negotiation of meaning strategies by EFL learners at different language proficiency in two-way communication tasks

The question was directed to an examination of the occurrence of the negotiation of meaning strategies used by the students with different language proficiency: high-proficiency level, mid-proficiency level, and low-proficiency level in two-way communication tasks; problem-solving tasks, information gap tasks, and story-telling tasks.
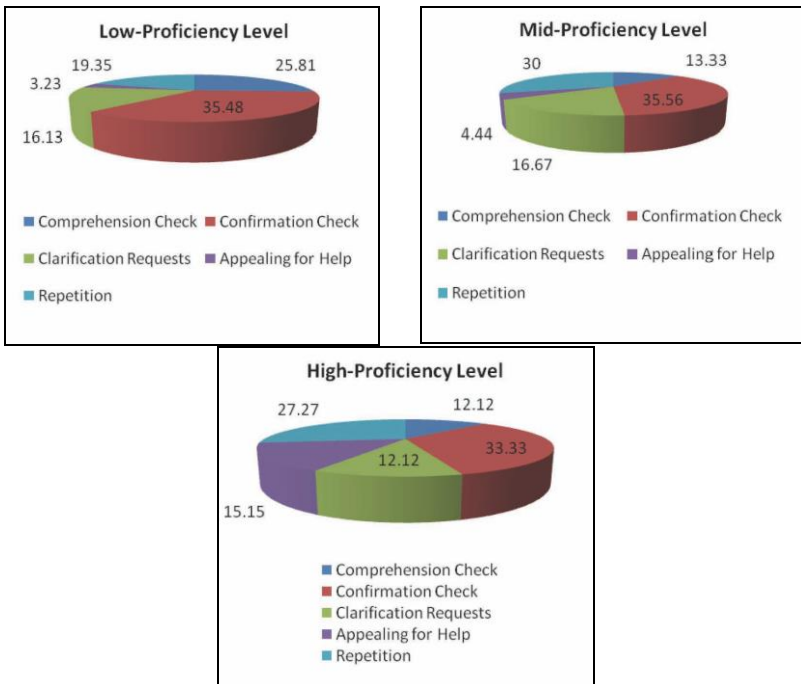
Figure 2 The occurrence of negotiation of meaning strategies in problem-solving tasks in three different language proficiency groups

From figure 2, most of EFL learners at all proficiency levels employed confirmation check the most in problem-solving tasks. For the low proficiency students, the three frequently used strategies were confirmation check (35.48),
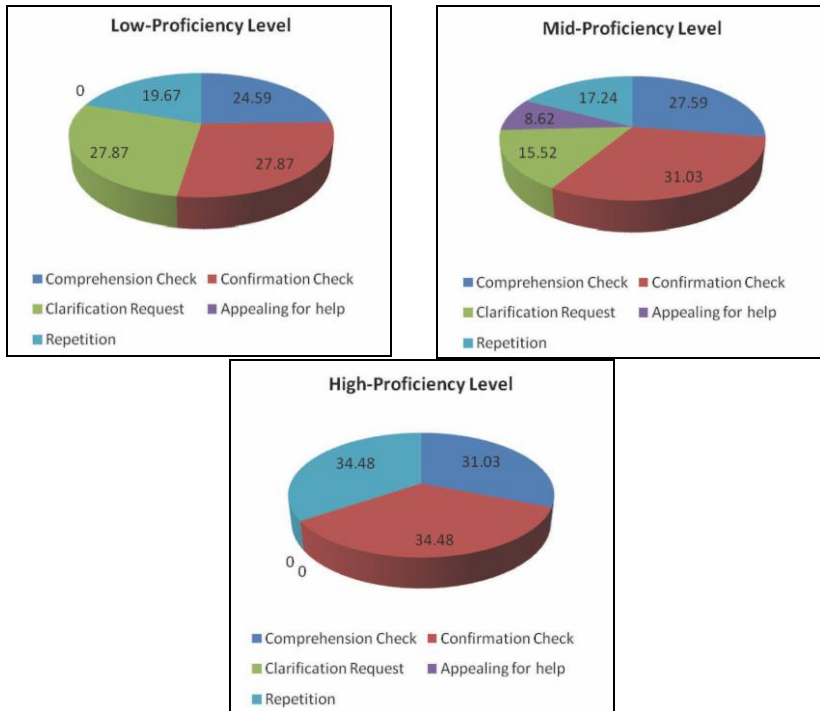
comprehension check (25.81), and repetition (19.35). While for the mid proficiency students, they were confirmation check (35.56), repetition (30.00), and clarification request (16.67). Among high proficiency students, they were confirmation check (33.33), repetition (27.27), and appealing for help (15.15) respectively.
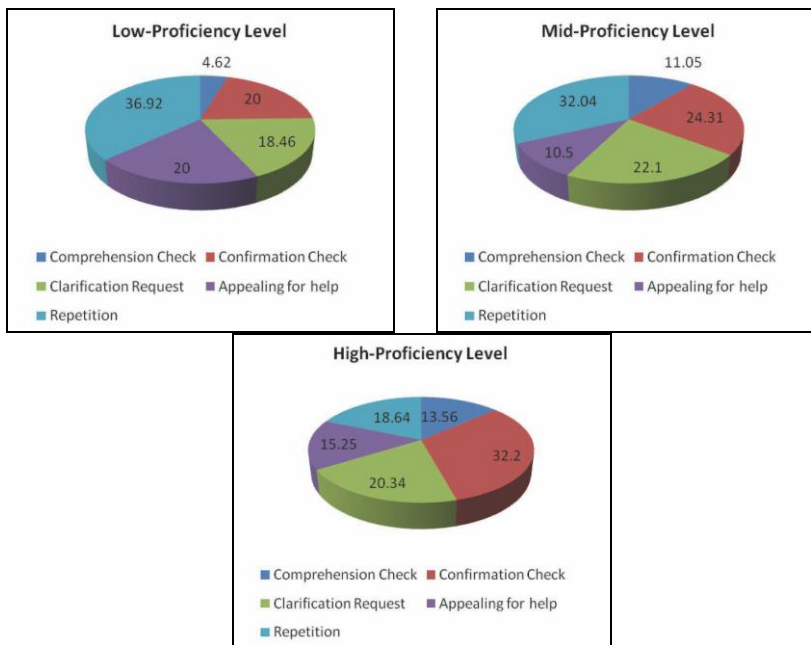
Figure 3 The occurrence of negotiation of meaning strategies in information gap tasks in three different language proficiency groups

From figure 3, low proficiency students and mid proficiency students produced repetition strategies the highest. For low proficiency students, the top three frequently used strategies were repetition (36.92), confirmation check and appealing for help (20.00). As for the mid proficiency students, they were

repetition (32.04), confirmation check (24.31), and clarification request (22.10). Among high proficiency students, they were confirmation check (32.20), clarification request (20.34), and repetition (18.64) respectively.

Figure 4 The occurrence of negotiation of meaning strategies in story telling tasks in three different language proficiency groups

From figure 4, it was found that most EFL learners employed confirmation check strategy the most. For the low proficiency students, the first three frequently used strategies were confirmation check and clarification request (27.87), and comprehension check (24.59). As for the mid proficiency students, they were confirmation check (31.03), comprehension check (27.59),

and repetition (17.24). Among high proficiency students, they were confirmation check and repetition (34.48), and comprehension check (31.03).

Overall, confirmation check was mostly produced by learners at all levels of proficiency in all problem-solving and story-telling tasks. The result was consistent with many findings that confirmation checks were used more significantly during interactions either in NS (native speaker)-NNS (non-native speaker) conversations or NNS-NNS. As in Long and Sato (1983), stated that confirmation checks were used more significantly in the native speaker (NS)-non-native speaker (NNS) conversations than other strategies. Oliver (2002) also claimed that NNS–NNS dyads used more negotiation of meaning strategies than did the NNS–NS dyads. In his study also suggested that confirmation checks and clarification requests were greatly produced in both adult and child dyads.

Research Question 2: What are the effects of the use of negotiation of meaning strategies in two-way communication tasks on grammar usage among 3 groups of students with different language proficiency?

Negotiation of meaning strategies facilitates the interaction among the students. From the findings, it could be assumed that negotiation of meaning strategies used by learners during two-way communication tasks: problem-solving tasks, information-gap tasks, and story-telling tasks could help learners develop their grammar usage as presented in figure 4 below.
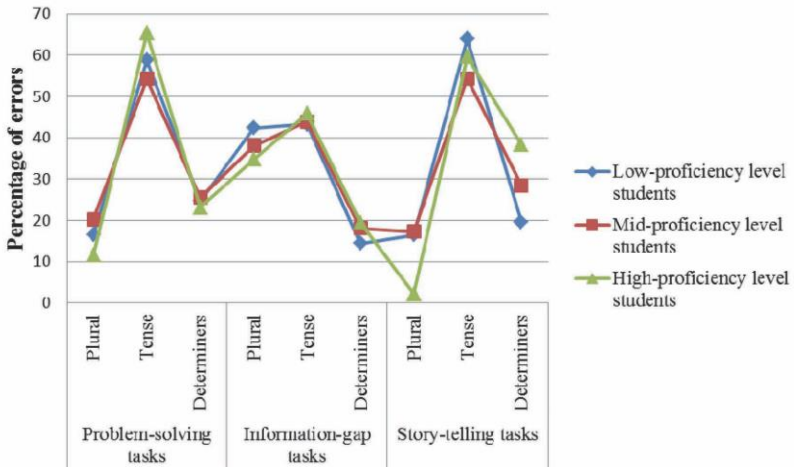
Figure 5   Grammatical development in two-way tasks among the students at different language proficiency levels

The data from figure 5 showed that all proficiency level students had gained grammatical development in the study. For example, low-proficiency students, mid-proficiency students and high-proficiency students had fewer errors in plural in the story- telling tasks. In terms of tense, all of proficiency students had fewer errors in the information-gap tasks. As for determiners, low-proficiency students had lower frequency of errors in the information-gap tasks.

Moreover, the qualitative result also supported the proposition that negotiation of meaning strategies enhances the grammar usage of the students. As in the interaction between low-proficiency level student and high-proficiency level student in a problem-solving task showed the awareness of the mismatch between incorrect and correct tense of the low-proficiency level student.

M1:   Ok, Fon. What's the matter on you?

H2:   I really want to study abroad, but my parents they don't support me.

M1:   **Really? Why?** ——→ | Confirmation check strategy |

H2:   Umm..my parents don't want me to stay far from home. They would like me to study here, but I don't like it. I want to be independent.

Do you understand me? ——→ | Comprehension check strategy |

M2:   Yes, I understand. I ever been through this problem before. **Did you try to tell your parents what is the best?** ——→ | Modification of the use of past simple tense |

From the excerpt above which showed the interaction between mid-proficiency level student (M1) and high-proficiency level student (H2), mid-proficiency level student employed confirmation check strategy, and in the following sentence, he could use past simple tense correctly as in

"Yes, I understand. I ever been through this problem before. Did you try to tell your parents what is the best?"

Through learning process, negotiation of meaning strategies triggered the modification of students' output; that means, the students acquired grammatical development when there was negotiation of meaning. The grammatical development among the students in this study included present tense, past tense, future tense, articles, etc.

Ellis (1984) contends that conversational interaction contribute to language development:

> *…interaction contributes to development because it is the means by which the learner is able to crack the code. This takes place when the learner can infer what is said even though the message contains linguistic items that are not yet part of his competence and when the learner can use the discourse to help him modify or supplement the linguistic knowledge he has already used in production.*

When the interlocutors take turns in conversations, each participant must understand the other participant's contribution in order to maintain the flow of the discourse (Boulima, 1999). When learners engage in interaction, it is discourse flow which provides them not only with the opportunity to formulate short-term hypotheses about the meaning of their interlocutors' utterances, but also with appropriate data to formulate long-term hypotheses about the linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic rules of target language (Gass & Varonis, 1984). At the same time, when learners are negotiating for meaning, the linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic rules of their interlanguage are presumably put to test, with regard to their communicative outcome (Chaudron, 1988 in Boulima, 1999).

In summary, negotiation of meaning strategies help the students develop their grammar usage in two-way communication tasks. In all groups of proficiency levels, it was found that the substantial number of students who employed those strategies while they were performing two-way communication tasks could be able to make fewer errors in grammar. This finding suggested that negotiation of meaning strategies facilitated grammatical development among EFL learners.

Conclusion

The findings of this study showed that EFL learners at different proficiency levels used confirmation check strategies significantly in problem solving tasks and story-telling tasks which are two-way communication tasks. The speakers, even native speakers or non-native speakers selected to use this strategy to overcome their communication breakdown or continue their interactions. In this study, all levels of proficiency; low, mid, or high proficiency, were aware of using confirmation check strategy; for example, "Really?", "Right?", or "OK?" to confirm their understandings with their interlocutors as the strategy is a common expression. As Long and Sato (1983) insisted that confirmation check is one of the three most important processes; comprehension checks, confirmation checks and clarification requests, involved in the speaker and interlocutor's attempts to understand and be understood.

However, in information gap tasks, repetition strategy was used more frequently among low proficiency students and mid proficiency students, but the high proficiency students used confirmation check strategy. It might be claimed that type and frequency of negotiation for meaning strategy use may vary according to learners' oral proficiency level (Nakatani, 2005). Lower proficiency students could seek for simple strategy such as repetition to solve their communication breakdown. While higher proficiency students could be able to choose more appropriate negotiation of meaning strategies. Moreover, information gap task was found most effective in promoting the use of negotiation of meaning strategies. The two-way communication tasks such as the problem-solving task, information gap task and story-telling task in this

study provide an opportunity for learners to negotiation for meaning. As the students had a chance to negotiate meaning; therefore, they were able to improve their communicative competence more quickly (Sommat, 2007). Therefore, this two-way task should be as adopted in courses developing a communicative interactional skills in foreign language classroom as this provide a rich communication environments resembling a real-world interaction.

The results also revealed that provision of two-way communication tasks in this study has been proved to enable the students to interact communicatively and promote their grammatical development. Two-way communication tasks such as problem-solving task, information-gap task and story-telling task enhance the production of negotiation of meaning strategies among the students at different language proficiency. Not only the production of negotiation of meaning, but also the grammatical development among them occurred. When there was a communication breakdown or when the interlocutor triggered the speaker's utterance, they were aware that their messages were not clear, so they had to adjust their output to make them comprehensible to their interlocutor.

The results of the present study supports Ellis's (1984) conclusion that conversational interaction contributes to language development. It enhances language development of the learners, and interaction works when they can infer what meaning is carried; even though they did not fully understand the whole message, they can use the discourse to help modify their own linguistic knowledge.

Also, the findings lend the support to Gass and Varonis's (1984) claims that interaction facilitates language learning. When learners engage in

interaction, it is discourse flow which provides them not only with the opportunity to formulate short-term hypotheses about the meaning of their interlocutors' utterances, but also with appropriate data to formulate long-term hypotheses about the linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic rules of target language

In conclusion, negotiation of meaning during interaction helps language learner develop their linguistic acknowledgment. When learners are negotiating for meaning, the linguistic, semantic, and pragmatic rules of their interlanguage are presumably put to test, with regard to their communicative outcome (Chaudron, 1988 in Boulima, 1999). It could be suggested that the frequent use of negotiation of meaning strategies could contribute to the grammatical development of EFL learners in all levels of proficiency.

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