



# An Examination of Negotiation Process among ESL Learners in Higher Institution

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## Abstract

Negotiation is an integral part of our daily lives. It occurs everywhere and requires skillful interactions. The purpose of this study is to examine the negotiation process among ESL learners and identify any problem that may arise in the process. The participants were twenty-six students who enrolled a course on effective oral communication skills in a public university in Malaysia. The main data were generated from a situational observation of the interactional features produced by the participants who were engaged in the negotiation tasks planned and created by them beforehand. Open-ended questionnaires were also used to capture learners' reflections of the negotiation process. It is found that ESL learners come across major problems, such as loss of words and ideas, and also being overshadowed by proficient learners. The findings of this study contribute to the existing literature on negotiation process by providing insights into the problems faced by the learners while negotiating. These insights are hoped to be useful for teachers in equipping students with necessary language skills for them to manage negotiation process effectively.

**Keywords:** ESL speakers, ESL learning, Meaning-making, Malaysia, Negotiation

## 1. Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is highly driven by the input received by speakers. The longer the speaker are immersed in the language, the better the language transfer process is. The amount of voluntary reading and the opportunity to interact in L2 can significantly influence the speed and quality of learning L2 to reach advanced levels (Yunus, Mohamad, & Waelateh, 2016). Negotiation as a speaking task involves a lot of interaction among speakers and is very suitable to foster language transfer.

Negotiation is defined by Rubin and Brown (1975) as a process in which two or more individuals work together in order to produce agreements about a disputed issue through interaction. They generate offers, receive offers, or both. A negotiation process can be made more complicated with the involvement of many parties as proven by Bazerman et al. (2000) in which they found that the greater the number of people involved, the more complicated for the negotiation process to attain its agreement. Agreement can only occur if the offers made are agreed by both parties (Neale & Northcraft, 1991) and in the absence of an agreed outcome, a distributive negotiation is the result where one party have to finally concede its interests or options for the negotiation to progress and it will not be a win-win agreement. Thompson (1990) refers to this type of one-sided negotiation as a fixed-sum. On the other hand, a pure coordinated-negotiation is when the parties involved in a negotiation are totally well-matched and they finally reach a mutual decision as referred by Carnevale and Pruitt (1992). Another type of negotiation - the most common - is when both parties have neither compatible nor opposed interests. Lewicki et al. (2001) asserts that this is the most recurrent negotiation type.

Evidently, negotiation is an integral part of daily lives of people. It occurs everywhere and interactions take place a lot during negotiations. As such, it is fitting for negotiation to be part of role plays in ESL classrooms to induce speaking amongst students. Knowing that English is the second language for the participants, problems are expected. Thus, it is the purpose of this interaction research to identify the problems experienced by ESL speakers in negotiation.

### *1.1 Speaking Task*

Ability to speak fluently in English is one of the language learners' main targets. The purpose is to enable them to communicate well in today's globalized world, thus changing their preferences towards conversation, rather than public speaking, debates or other oral activities. Conversation or interaction is regarded as the most basic and widespread linguistic means of conducting human affairs. In general, interaction or conversation implies communication, the exchange of signals, verbally and non-verbally, among people who belong to a group.

In classroom setting, when conducting speaking tasks, learners will have to interact whether openly in class or in smaller groups (group discussion). For most extrovert learners, doing public speaking is nothing challenging for them compared to the introverts who might experience stage fright, low self-esteem or high anxiety level. Addressing this issue, Swain (1985) studied on speaking preference among learners. Swain found that small group discussion was more popular and well-liked by learners compared to speaking in class because of minimal interference or correction from teachers.

In view of the fact that group discussion is favoured by learners, educators need to consider implementing it in their lessons. Grouping learners help optimizing learning when they collaborate with each other in bridging the gap, and knowledge sharing. Shaw (1976) shares the same concept where he defines group as "persons who are interacting with one another in such a manner that each person influences and is influenced by each other" (p.31). Adding more traits in forming a group, Johnson and Johnson (1991) define group as a collection of two or more individuals, who meet in face-to-face interaction, interdependently, with the awareness that each belongs to the group and for the purpose of achieving mutually agreed-upon goals.

Brilhart (1995) in his work classifies groups into two major categories namely primary and secondary groups. Primary groups existed to satisfy human needs for inclusion rather than to accomplish a task. People in general need personal attention and support especially from the ones nearest to them. For instance, roommates, families, co-workers and partners whom they could talk to freely in a disorganized and informal way. On the contrary, secondary groups initiated to complete tasks, solve problems or make decision. There are many types of secondary groups, such as activity groups, personal growth groups, learning groups and finally problem-solving groups. The second type is the one being implemented in classroom.

Group members is the key component of a group. Theoretically, each member brings some different knowledge, perspectives and skills relevant to the group's purpose. All of them, with varied individual characteristics, played important roles in achieving the objectives proposed earlier. Basically, each member should have good communicative attitudes while discussing within a group. All of them ought to possess a sense of responsibility for the group's success, willingness to communicate as well as ways of expressing thoughts that are all vital in contributing to group achievement.

A group is deemed sound when all members being constructive where they are dependable and willing to do the best to see the group achieved its goal. These members volunteer to do a fair share of the work and can be counted on to get it done. There are no such thing as 'you should do this' and 'it's your part'. Failure to do a fair share of the tasks given is the biggest source of friction among members. Besides, people come with several characters whether they are egalitarian or authoritarian. Egalitarian always encourage full participation by all members whilst authoritarian, at the other extreme, always dominate a group.

Moreover, the group achievement also depends on members' willingness to communicate. There are two types of communicating assertively skills: aggressive and passive. Aggressive discussants are normally highly dominant. They force ideas and practice on others which is one of the destructive elements to productive discussion, cohesiveness and teamwork. Passive discussants, on the other hand, tended to make little eye contact, speak softly and would not resist aggressors. They usually go along with the majority. Both skills are not appropriate enough for a good discussion since they both are at extremes. To be a good group member, each of them should hold assertiveness whereby they communicate openly as equals to others, explain as clearly as possible, attempt to understand the ideas and wants of other members and attempt to co-orient.

In a group discussion, transaction process took place and is considered as the most important principle. Transaction is actually a communicating process whereby participants who involve in the discussion must cooperate and work together in order to achieve shared understanding.

### *1.2 Interlanguage Talk*

Incompetent language users commonly use interlanguage to communicate in the L2. Interlanguage talk refers to the speech of a foreign-language learner where it is generally inaccurate stapled with abundance of ungrammatical errors. Though it is grammatically incorrect, learners can understand each other when they use it together. This kind of talk is one of the ways to master target language. A study by Fathman (1976) reveals that interlanguage talk received help non-native speakers progress better in language acquisition if there are many of the same kind rather than in environment with less non-native speakers. In classroom discourse, interlanguage talks have some advantages over second language acquisition. The exercises given in class should be varied so as to help these ungrammatical speakers to grab the language items implicitly and explicitly (Ismail & Yusof, 2016). They can be classified either to focus on gaining formal or conscious knowledge of the target language.

Brown (1990) defines intelligibility in interlanguage talk as a one way process in which non-natives speakers are

striving to make themselves understood by native speakers. For the communication to take place, both speaker and listener should have common background information. For instance, if they are talking about one of chemical processes, both parties should know what it is all about. Language is one issue, the content is another. In communication of interlanguage talk, the listener normally will have difficulties in understanding the speech uttered, both linguistically and extra-linguistic level. This is due to lack of contextual background and L1 phonological transfer. The speaker of L2, on the other hand, should be aware of their phonological output or pronunciation in order to make their speech comprehensible for the foreigner.

Assimilatory and dissimilatory processes are closely related to interlanguage talk. As for assimilatory process, fluent speakers usually use this process to facilitate the ability to pronounce words or sentences in making articulation easier. This type of process is speaker-oriented. Some of the processes used are catenation or linking of sounds, elision or omission of sounds and assimilation or replacement of sounds (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994). On the contrary, dissimilatory process, as described by Jenkins (2000), is a process where speakers subordinate their speech strategies to their listeners' needs by articulating more clearly. It is also known as listener-oriented since it focuses greatly in catering listeners' needs.

Interlanguage talks always lead to miscommunication when pronunciations of words are wrong. This is because of the transfer of L1 sounds to the language being learned. Among the pronunciations problems are the speed delivery, faulty intonation patterns as well as syntax (Jenkins, 2000). Since young learners are new to second language learning, pronunciations should be really focused because they still cannot grasp the language entirely. These learners need to give extra attention to words and sentences whereby any modifying process will delay their comprehension.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Research Design*

This is a qualitative research which used transcription of negotiations task sessions as the main source of data. Besides the transcriptions, open-ended questionnaires were also used to generate additional data. Since the objective of this study is to get an in-depth understanding rather than generalization of findings, qualitative research design is deemed appropriate for this study.

### *2.2 Participants*

The participants were twenty-six students from a Science Faculty at a public university in Malaysia. They were purposely chosen as they were taking a course on effective oral communication skills. The course, as stated in the course outline, focused on the techniques of producing good spoken conversation using the appropriate English sound and speech system. Genders, race, age, background as well as language proficiency were not taken into consideration in grouping sessions. The rationale behind this was to help foster interactions since heterogeneity in groups aid lower proficiency learners to learn whilst the ones with greater ability can teach and use their existent knowledge (Rashid, 2012).

### *2.3 Data Collection*

Before recording the negotiation sessions, all participants were briefed about the tasks and the requirements for the course. In order to make the process less stressful and not to distract participants' attention, there was no participation of both researcher and lecturer to intervene in the sessions. All participants were divided into five groups of mixed abilities. Each group was given 20 minutes to discuss before ending the negotiation with a consensus. Besides the interactional features, the researcher also took into consideration the informative nonverbal behaviour that the group members exhibited in responding to the tasks which were related and useful for further understanding and answering research questions proposed.

Other than video-taping the negotiation sessions, open-ended surveys were also given to capture more in-depth data. After all sessions being conducted, all participants were requested to answer some questions (in open-ended format) based on their personal experience while conducting the negotiation tasks. Open-ended questionnaires contained reaction to the experience and reflections towards what had been done. Through the questionnaires, participants were able to communicate their experiences and record their thoughts on the negotiation process that might not be apparent in the video.

### *2.4 Data Analysis*

The participants' interactions while carrying out the speaking tasks were transcribed to serve as a representation of the details of participants' verbal and nonverbal conduct. The data were examined in order to seek out the interactional features employed during the negotiations for both low and intermediate proficiency learners and the perceived problems, if there any, with the assumption participants would face problems since the negotiations were conducted in L2.

In addition to transcriptions, researcher also made use of participants' responses in open-ended survey to get broader perspectives of participants' point of view which would be relevant to reach the objectives of this study.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

Since majority of the participants had no experience at all in negotiating, they expectedly underwent some problems while conducting the tasks. Based on the findings, it was found that there were four apparent problems faced by ESL learners in negotiating which were loss of ideas and words/vocabulary, overshadowed by proficient speaker, initiating

talk, and the use of *la, ceh, ha, eh, cewah, tuh, haish, heh, haiya* particles.

### 3.1 Loss of ideas and words/ vocabulary

Generally, all groups were able to come up with good, coherent and cohesive negotiation sessions despite the facts that they did have unsatisfactory linguistic and grammatical proficiency. Analysis of the transcriptions shows that interactants, either proficient or not, succeeded in making sure that the conversation continued. In a conversation involving a group of friends, it is common for the friends to be supportive and take up the topics introduced (Rashid, Rahman, & Rahman, 2016; Rashid, 2016). They were able to produce no isolated utterances and tied to the foregoing remarks though not all utterances were grammatically correct. Worst come to worst, they applied code-switching and non-verbal cue to convey their messages.

For this very problem, majority of students denoted that other group members were helping while negotiating. Group member number five (GM5) from Group 4 wrote, “...*friends were good helpers. We keep reminding each other to choose the shortest and easy-to-remember words*”. Some examples of peer-repairs from the transcriptions are as follows:

(Extract from transcription 1)

GM2 : /...well, this was a aaa company that aaa do all the party and so on

GM4 : multipurpose company

GM2 : yeah...multipurpose company

(Extract from transcription 2)

GM3 : /...compare by taking the bus because when they walk....they just take aaa

GM4 : few minutes

GM3 : aaa few minutes aaa to arrive to the faculty

(Extract from transcription 3)

GM5 : /...so it doesn't means that local graduates cannot aaa the aaa their level were not....[thinking]

GM1 : competence, was it?

GM5 : haa...competence...

Clearly, the problems were aggravated in equivalent proficiency group because there was no opportunity to call on a wide range of potential helpers. Differences would contribute to a lively and carefree ESL classroom.

Further, throughout the observation it was obvious that the less proficient speaker always adapted cueing as a strategy to help them delivered their meaning when they were having problems with English vocabulary. In ESL classroom, cueing allows learners to make inferences or guesses on the meanings of words not yet fully understood (Ventriglia, 1982). Ventriglia adds that cues are normally given to ESL learners by the more proficient speakers or derived individually from the nature of verbal interaction. Basically, contextual cues help in peer-initiated repairs in which the content given by the speakers are used to call up the existing knowledge and provide a context that supports comprehension and production in the utterances. In this way they provide a link between new and existing knowledge.

Evidently, it could be seen that students were trying to explain further on one single thing when he or she did not manage to produce the exact words. The rest of the group would try to guess the gist of the utterances which eventually construct the bridge to total comprehension. The examples below show how cues made inferencing possible.

(Extract from transcription 1)

GM4 : /...and then we have aaa to conduct a big dinner (binear)..do you know (binear)? //try to describe using hand movement

GM2 : yes. of course! well, this was a aaa company that aaa do all the party and so on

GM4 : multipurpose company

GM2 : yeah...multipurpose company

Evidently, cueing, both verbal and non-verbal succeeded in hinting other interactants. When GM4 lost ideas of how to describe ‘binear’, he adapted non-verbal cue where he tried to illustrate it by using hand movement. GM2 then was having problem to come up with the term ‘multipurpose company’, thus he explained further on what was the company all about.

(Extract from transcription 3)

GM5 : /...they all write well...so it doesn't means that local graduates cannot aaa the aaa their level were not....[thinking]

GM1 : competence, was it?

GM5 : haa...competence

The word 'well' simply gave idea on competency.

(Extract from transcription 4)

GM4 : mummy, I think that's not a big deal mummy...you know there was a lot of aaa spon...sponsorship out there and I'm sure that aaa we'll find several that fit with our profile and I will plead them to aaa...[thinking]

GM5 : sponsor us

GM4 : sponsor us...so

The term 'sponsorship' earlier hinted GM5 of what GM4 was trying to say.

### 3.2 Overshadowed by Proficient Speaker

As written in the open-ended survey, this was ranked the third most repeated problems while negotiating. Many students claimed that they hardly talk because the more proficient interactants tended to constrain the less competent ones. Throughout the negotiations, fluent speakers clearly monopolized the discussions in which they necessitating a short reply from others. It was not that these less proficient students could not talk at all. It happens in most ESL classrooms where less proficient students are mistreated and misjudged as an obstacle in language learning. They however are not getting opportunity to show themselves. As shown in this study, weak students who were very stiff and hardly came out with any kind of discussion skill at the beginning became more confident after a few series of negotiation.

In ESL classrooms, students often perceive being grouped based on mixed abilities as a big problem. They are very quick to measure the abilities of their classmates and personally rank them. This results in intimidation of low proficiency learners. Hence, interactions for this type of group should be more organized. Students should learn to allocate turns. They should be fair to each other and did not overshadow others. However, not all students would find it easy to withdraw support and taking active responsibility for others' advantage. Based on that, teacher should put learners of different cultures and backgrounds as well as level of proficiency together in one group. This is agreed by Lynch (1996) who claims that both parties would gain advantage from the mixed-ability grouping.

### 3.3 Initiating Talk

GM4 from group 5 wrote "...I feel so nervous to start it first. As the person where I should create the situation, it seem that everyone depend on me". Clearly it shows that the person who had been elected to initiate the discussion usually felt responsible for the whole interaction. It was obvious that she was a more proficient L2 speakers compared to the others in the group and the tendency to have longer turn was higher. From all the five groups, there would be at least one interactant from each group who acted as the initiator or moderator to maintain continuity of discussion (GM4 for group 1, GM4 and GM5 for group 2, GM1 for group 3, GM2 for group 4 and GM4 for group 5). Inactive members seemingly always made it hard for initiator since they always cut it short and tended to offer the floor to others despite giving other points to be added. Minimal responses like "oh...ok" made the turn stopped at once.

Regarding this matter, a study was conducted by Seliger (1977) to test the hypothesis on effects of initiating interactions on ESL learners. Seliger found that learners who actively initiating interactions benefited more from practices done and eventually learned that target language faster and better. Besides, a good ESL learner should know how to take charge of their own learning. Evidently, the findings show that low proficient learners were unable to take full advantage of learning opportunities while conducting the negotiation tasks. Since they thought that they were incapable of interacting, they seldom initiated and participated in interactions. They depended totally on others to successfully complete the tasks. These learners should at least try to interact more and get more feedback so as to acquire the language. They could not do nothing to gain everything.

### 3.4 The la, ceh, ha, eh, cewah, tuh, haish, heh, haiya Particles

The transcriptions indicated quite clearly that the cultural traits of each speaker were manifested in their language. There were a lot of la particles being used especially by Malay speakers at the end of phrases. Zainab (1995) states that la particle was regarded as a joke among Malaysian which adds colour and unique quality to Malaysian English. Below is an example of la particle used by the participants.

(Extract from transcription 4)

GM1 : oh...it's ok..it the small matter la...pika

The same goes to the use of 'cewah', 'haiya' and 'haish'. In addition, as shown in Transcription 1, the use of *la* elicited a view that a good rapport was built among them. The existence of camaraderie element between speakers made the negotiation at ease. Besides that, *la* also was used when the speaker was not really convinced with the points made but was willing to acknowledge them as in:

(Extract from transcription 1)

GM2 : ok **la**...ok **la**...ok CEO? Reduce just RM2

*eh* particles were also rampant in the negotiations. This indicates that the speakers suddenly realized that they were doing mistakes or used wrong words in the utterances. For instance:

(Extract from transcription 2)

GM2 : /...when they get up to the bus **eh**...when they step down to the bus.../

or

GM4 : /...use the main **eh** shortcut road because some of students/

*eh* particles were also used in order to ask for clarification or to emphasize utterances as in:

(Extract from transcription 1)

To emphasize

GM2 : /..1 people only cost RM10...right? good mathematician **eh**

or

GM4 : you're so smart **eh**

To Ask for clarification

GM5 : 15<sup>th</sup> **eh**?

#### 4. Conclusion

The study concludes that loss of ideas or words and vocabulary are two most important hindrances in the negotiation tasks. This indicates the lack of reading and speaking practice of L2 among the participants. Vocabulary can be enriched through reading while continuous usage of L2 through speaking can make idea production easier during a speaking task. The usage of localized particles is normal but can be reduced. These particles may not be understood by different sections of societies since the popular culture may differ.

Another problem is the proficient speakers being too dominant. In a real world negotiation, proficiency helps if a party wish to aggressively present its offers. However, intimidation does not always ensure agreement. It may even lead to non-agreement. In a classroom task, negotiation as a speaking task should be a medium to encourage all parties to come out with an output in L2. As such, the environment should be more encouraging for the less proficient ones and the proficient speakers need to facilitate rather than complicate the process of learning. The existence of a moderator can help organize the process.

Last but not least is the unwillingness to initiate talk amongst the less proficient speakers. It is psychologically normal for someone with less ability to feel inferior. Nonetheless, being in a learning process, such tendency and timidity need to be removed. The moderator and the more proficient learners can help by encouraging them and not being too aggressive towards them. Confidence building can help make the process more accommodating and successful.

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