

Acquisition through meaning negotiation, non-negotiated input and non-negotiated output in the Web-chat context

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Abstract

The present paper investigated the role of meaning negotiation, non-negotiated input, and non-negotiated output in the context of free conversation via Web chat. In order to see whether and to what extent input and output promote acquisition in meaning negotiation context and non-negotiation context respectively, the present study analyzed 43 sessions of Web chat data collected from one Korean EFL learner, J, who communicated with different chatters abroad, for over six month, along with the information collected through two one-on-one interviews and J's self-comment. The analysis of the chat data, interviews, and self-comment showed that learners can notice the items in the input and incorporate it in their own production, without meaning negotiation. It also revealed that learners can reformulate their own production even when they do not receive negative feedback in the context of meaning negotiation. Output opportunities were also found to contribute to the proceduralization of passive vocabulary. The respective roles of negotiated input, negotiated output, non-negotiated input, and non-negotiated output have been discussed in view of the characteristics unique to the Web chat environment

Keywords

Meaning negotiation, input, output, synchronous CMC, Web chat

Introduction

Recently, there has been a growing interest in the role of interaction in language learning. It has been claimed that language learning can be best achieved in the context of interaction because interaction is the forum of meaning negotiation (Long, 1990). Educators have made efforts to provide the optimal condition for interaction to take place. One of the outcome of such efforts is Task-Based Language Learning. In the course of solving communicative problems, L2 learners were claimed to engage in meaning negotiation. Still, learners who need to

continue learning beyond the classroom context are not likely to find sufficient amount of authentic interaction in L2.

The availability of synchronous CMC, especially Web chat allows learners to use L2 in an authentic and interactive context, beyond the limits of time and space. It is thus important to examine whether and how learners acquire language via Web chat. The present study will explore the process through which the learner acquires linguistic features, by getting exposed to input and output opportunities in the context of meaning negotiation. It will also examine the process the learner acquires language by exposed to input and output opportunities in the absence of meaning negotiation.

1 Conditions for L2 acquisition.

Krashen(1985), in his Input Hypothesis, distinguished acquisition from learning. In order to gain the fluent proficiency of L2, he claimed that learners should subconsciously acquire or "pick up" the language instead of consciously learning it. Krashen claimed that in order for this process to take place, the learners should get exposed to sufficient amount of input.

Swain (1995), on the other hand, stressed role of output in acquiring structural knowledge. She argued that output has its own role in several ways: practicing function that leads to fluency; noticing function that leads to the realization of the learner's linguistic problem; hypothesis testing function that allows the learner to get feedback about language; metalinguistic function that lead to grammatical awareness.

On the other hand, Long (1981, 1996) focused the interactional structure of communication. He noted that interactional modification that occurs in the process of meaning negotiation provides the optimal condition for acquisition in that the learner comes to notice the formal aspect of the input when s/he does not understand the interlocutor. Through the negotiation process the incomprehensible input can become comprehensible. Likewise, when the learner's erroneous form hinders communication,

s/he gets a signal of non-understanding. In the course of modifying the output, the learner is pushed to produce a form closer to the target norm. Follow-up studies raised questions about the status of meaning negotiation in language acquisition. Some suggested that meaning negotiation itself does not stand as evidence that acquisition has taken place. Others have stressed that learning is a gradual process whereby declarative/explicit knowledge converts to procedural/implicit knowledge.

In view of the above discussions, it is necessary to explore whether and how the language items that has gone through the meaning negotiated process are actually acquired. It is also important to explore whether and how the language items that has not gone through meaning negotiation are acquired.

This study focused on this process of acquisition in the context of Web chat. As Web chat environment is different from face-to-face conversation, the data was expected to exhibit some characteristics unique to Web-chat environment.

2. Methods

The informant of the present study was a female university student majoring English at a local university in South Korea. She started chatting via Omegul and MSN with people worldwide. A total 43 sessions of Web chat were collected over 6 months.

The occurrences of meaning negotiation were identified. They were divided according to whether meaning negotiation was triggered by incomprehensible input or incomprehensible output. It was further examined whether any input that had not been negotiated were incorporated in the learner language. It was also examined whether the learner reformulated her own language that had not been negotiated.

The researcher conducted two interviews in order to interpret the data, especially whether she comprehended a certain item in the input and whether a certain item is new or familiar.

3. Results

3.1 Negotiated Input and Acquisition

The meaning negotiation of input was not very frequent. J negotiated for incomprehensible input on 35 occasions, centering such word as “xbox”, “obtuse”, and “barbarian”. The fact that meaning negotiation on these items took place indicates that they were noticed. However, it is not clear whether J actually processed the target items so that they became intake, as no overt evidence that J incorporated these negotiated target words were found in her own utterances in the following turns

or other sessions.

3.2 Negotiated Output and Acquisition

J's output did not invite frequent meaning negotiation. The interlocutors via Web chat was not active in attacking the problem areas that cause communication problems as long as general understanding can be obtained. Further J's output that triggered meaning negotiation was rarely followed by her repair of the relevant structure. Seldom did the other party provided the correct version.

3.3 Non-Negotiated Input and Acquisition

On the other hand, J noticed some new items in the input such as “insomnia”, “add you”, and “bug”, and incorporated them in her own production, in spite that these items were not subject to meaning negotiation. This shows that positive input plays its function in the Web chat context.

3.4 Non-Negotiated Output and Acquisition

During the output phase, J attempted new expressions that she had never used in production, such as “dear”, “distort”, and “benefit” in production. These newly introduced items tended to recur in later production. This suggests that the passive knowledge that she learned consciously is being converted into active, implicit knowledge.

4. Conclusion

The findings show that input and output has acquisition value whether they are negotiated or non-negotiated. They also suggest that meaning negotiation is especially helpful when the learner tries to comprehend a totally unfamiliar item, while it might take time for the noticed item via meaning negotiation to be further processed and incorporated in the learner language.

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