

Negotiation for Meaning and Feedback in ESL Writing Class

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Abstract

Teacher and peer feedback may appear as a controversial aspect in ESL writing classes. Many researchers have studied the effects of teacher/peer feedback on second language writing. However, very few have discussed the impact of negotiation meaning when feedback is provided. This paper attempts to find out whether negotiation for meaning improves second language writing. In doing so, a number of studies are examined. Although the findings of the studies support negotiation for meaning while feedback is given, research is still needed to consider the role of negotiation for meaning with grammar and writing style. The aim of this paper is to give an overview of whether learners' use of social interaction and negotiation for meaning facilitates learning and improves ESL writing.

Key words: Feedback, sociocultural theory, negotiation for meaning, attention, peer training.

Introduction

Second language learners face many challenges when learning English. Parts of these challenges are influenced by their cultural and environmental backgrounds. For instance, one of the most important cultural artifacts of countries [with a highly oral culture] is their sense of orality (Bigelow, 2010). That is to say, they are more powerful when they speak than when they write. Ong (1991) maintained “The shift from orality to literacy and on to electronic processing engages social, economic, political, religious and other structures” (p. 3). Therefore, the need for interactional feedback has increased as one of the methods that might assist ESL students in their understanding of the target language (Lantolf, 2000; Gass, 2003, 2008; Foster and Ohta, 2005). However, I believe misunderstanding or vague feedback can be a drawback in this process and lead to negative results. Consequently, interaction and discussion can be favored as one approach to improve ESL students’ writing during the feedback process. Thus, because second language students are coming from different backgrounds, negotiation for meaning is used as a good technique, which is encompassed, by interaction and discussion to diminish the confusion in writing and produce better essays.

Negotiation for meaning (NFM) is a technique that can be used while giving feedback through interaction that may facilitate learning and produce better writing (Foster and Ohta, 2005). This paper attempts to highlight the importance of adopting sociocultural theory in second language writing classes by exploring Gee’s (2012) concept of negotiation for meaning and Long’s interaction hypothesis (Gass, 2003). Furthermore, this paper will define peer reviewing in relation to these theories by examining NFM in a number of studies dating from 1999 to 2011. In conclusion I will demonstrate some problems associated with peer/teacher review and NFM.

Theoretical Background

Sociocultural theory

Vygotsky claims “[H]uman behavior results from the integration of socially and culturally constructed forms of mediation into human activity” (Lantolf, 2000, p.8). This claim shows that humans are ingrained within their cultures and societies. As they produce the language they are directly or indirectly influenced by their societies and cultures; therefore, for sociocultural theory, learning a language is a social process in which students mainly rely on social interaction within a given social practice. For example, Foster and Ohta (2005) state that sociocultural theory “view[s] mind and learning as something inter-mental, embedded in social interaction” (p. 403). In other words, people are part of their environment and they cannot be separated from these environments. In this way, knowledge is not generated by the learners alone, but by the interaction between the learners and the social context (Foster and Ohta, 2005). Students learn the language through their interaction with the social context in their classroom, when they interact with their peers, a new social context appears. For example, second language learners usually think in their first language and they write in the target language, which is also influenced by the new set of social practices. Lantolf (2000) states that even if the students in the same class are doing similar tasks they do not respond equally to those tasks because students have different motives, desires and goals that make the classroom interactions more significant and valuable.

Furthermore, one of the fundamental concepts in sociocultural theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is defined as the differences between what learners can do alone and what can the same learner do with the help of other learners (Lantolf, 2000). Vygotsky (as cited in Foster and Ohta, 2005, p. 414) defines the ZPD as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.” Foster and Ohta (2005) state “ZPD is used to understand how assistance is related to language development” (p. 414). In other words, the ZPD according to Vygotsky is evidence for utilizing peer reviewing in ESL classes (Vygotsky, 1971). As mentioned in Vygotsky learners at certain stages need some kind of assistance (scaffolding) and they can receive this assistance from their peers (ibid). Scaffolding occurs when students adjust their roles and type of assistance according to the student who needs that assistance. In writing class the social interaction and the cultural clashes may improve the students’ writing when discussion is provided. Some students for example, who come from oral societies, prefer speaking to clarify their ideas (Bigelow, 2010). Therefore, according to Gee (2012) meaning is not stable; it is negotiable and shared within cultures and societies. He argues that it is better to study writing and speaking within their social context because both speaking and writing are inseparable and complete each other.

Negotiation for Meaning

When speaking or writing meaning is significant in order to send correct messages. Gee (2012) argues that meaning is not fixed in the mind like any other concept rather “meaning is primarily the result of social interaction, negotiations, contestations and agreements among people. It is inherently variable and social” (p. 21). When using a second language, many students think that words have fixed meanings so they can always use them to imply the same concept. When writing like you speak the meaning of the words are changed according to the context in which the words are used. Let’s consider the following example from Gee (2012) about the meaning of a simple word like coffee:

“If I say, “The coffee spilled, go get a mop”, I am talking about a liquid. If I say, “The coffee spilled, go get a broom”, I am talking about beans or grains. If I say, “The coffee spilled, stack it again”, I am talking about tins or cans. If I say, “Coffee growers exploit workers”, I am talking about coffee berries and the trees they grow on” (p. 21)

Gee (2012) adds, “All words vary their meanings in different contexts. All words can take on new meanings in new contexts. And all words are open to negotiation and contestation” (p. 14). In other words, meaning is what students have in minds and try to put into words as well as being what they are looking for when they read their peers comments. Ibid argues that meanings are bounded by negotiation between different people in different social contexts. The fact that students are coming from different backgrounds may make classrooms a new social context that could provide them with various social practices allowing them to negotiate different meanings. According to Gass (2003), negotiation between native speakers and second language speakers and between two or more second language students is very important in developing second language skills. That is to say “conversation is not a medium of practice, but also the means by which learning takes place” (p. 234). When giving feedback, negotiation and discussion are

required in order to understand what the student wants to write and what the reviewer wants to ask.

Additionally, Long (as cited in Gass, 2003, p. 234) defines negotiation for meaning in the Interaction Hypothesis as follow:

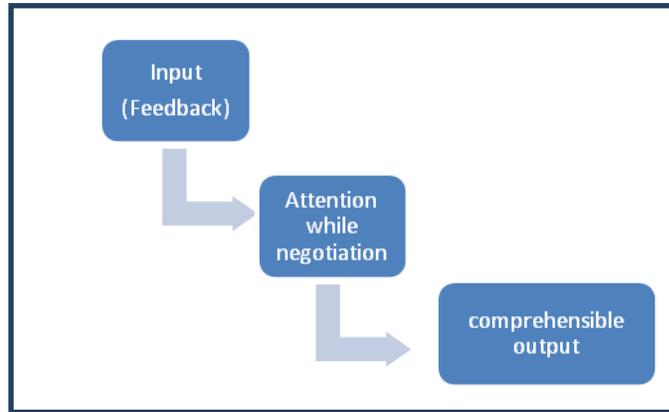
“Negotiation for meaning, and especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustment by the NS or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive way. It is proposed that environmental contributions to acquisition are mediated by selective attention and the learner’s developing L2 processing capacity . . . Negative feedback obtained during negotiation work or elsewhere may be facilitative of L2 development, at least for vocabulary, morphology and language –specific syntax, and essential for learning certain specifiable L1-L2 contrasts”

According to Long, negotiation for meaning is significant in learning a second language because it enables students to get feedback to facilitate understanding. Moreover, Long claims that attention is another required act during negotiation. Attention may help students figure out their mistakes and learn not to make them again. That is to say, during negotiation the learner’s “attentional resources” may be focused on the new language that he/she knows nothing about and his/her old native language (Gass, 2003, p. 235). Gass maintains that during this interaction and attention preliminary learning takes place. When the input (feedback) is available, attention should be central during the negotiation. This might help learners focus on their mistakes and their language production. Consider this example about “reading glasses”: From Mackey (as cited in Gass, 2003, p. 135):

“NS: there’s there’s a pair of reading glasses above the plant
 NNS: a what?
 NS: glasses reading glasses to see the newspaper?
 NNS: glassi?
 NS: you need to wear them to see with, if you can’t see. Reading glasses.
 NNS: ahh ahh glasses to read you say reading glasses.
 NS: yeah.”

From the example it is noticeable that the nonnative speaker is confused about the meaning of the phrase (reading glasses) until the native speaker explains it. The learning experience from this phrase comes from the negotiation being offered to the NNS, who is paying attention to the conversation. Jungmi (2003) states, “The negotiation of meaning in NNS’s interaction is a very important part of conversation because it shows that learners could offer the numerous interruptions to receive comprehensible input and to produce appropriate output, which could facilitate second language learning” (p. 206). Therefore, during negotiation second language learners have the chance to ask as many questions as they like in order to understand the writing task. The following figure summarizes the input process while giving/receiving feedback:

Figure. 1. *Feedback and the input process*



Peer Feedback and Negotiation for Meaning

Peer feedback, also referred to as peer review, peer editing, peer response and peer evaluation is commonly used in L1 and L2 writing classes, it is an activity where students have a chance to help each other by giving comments on their writing (Lundstrom and Baker, 2009). It also means students working together to improve, edit, rewrite and revise (Mi-mi, 2009). Peer feedback provides students with the opportunity to experience different knowledge through reading each others’ assignments, and help students to work with different types of errors. According to Gass, (2008) interactional feedback is an essential source of information for learners (p. 329). Gass also points out that “through interaction, the learners’ attention is drawn to some element(s) of language with possible consequence that that element/those elements will be incorporated into a learners’ developing system” (p. 330). That is to say, through peer feedback students learn from each others’ mistakes and ideas. Thus, whether the feedback is positive or negative it still provides a learning experience that L2 students are pursuing. One example of adopting feedback strategy, as suggested by Tsui and NG (2000,p. 152), is as follows:

Figure . 2. *Writing Cycle*



Figure 2, the writing cycle presents an outline of how interaction in the writing class might take place. Although this process might take a longer time during class, it gives an opportunity for students to discuss their ideas with the teacher's supervision. According to the figure, after the brainstorming the first outline should be written. The idea of beginning with brainstorming engages students in an interactional process where they can generate as many ideas as possible. Immediately after the first outline, peer review takes place in order to help students gain comments and discuss their topics with their peers. Hence, the first real draft should be ready, then another peer feedback is required. At this point students will have more focused negotiation and assistance from their peers about content and grammar. When the second draft is ready, the teacher would provide his/her comments. These comments should be associated with negotiation and oral discussion. Finally, when the final draft is written, both peers, and teacher provide further comments on the final draft.

The following section argues the relationship between teachers/students feedback and negotiation for meaning in order to clarify how students view negotiation for meaning during feedback.

Teachers/Students Feedback and Negotiation for Meaning

Although students prefer working with their peers, different studies report contrary findings. On the one hand, some of these findings report that students favor the teacher's feedback because they think that the teacher never presents a wrong a comment (Tsui and NG, 2000; Bitchener et al 2005; Yang et al 2006; Zhao, 2010). Some students believe that their writing has improved only when they have a chance to negotiate their mistakes, whether or not these comments are provided by the teacher (Zhao, 2010). To find out whether negotiation for meaning improves second language writing during peer/ teacher review, the following studies are examined as below

Tsui and NG (2000) investigate whether students prefer teachers or peers feedback. They examine groups of students in a secondary school level by conducting questionnaires, interviews, and writing analysis methods. The findings show that even some of the groups report similar results about the preference of teachers and peers feedback; higher results favor the teacher's feedback. The students comment that they have more confidence in the teachers' comments than their peers because they believe that teachers are more experienced and authoritative than their peers, so their feedback is more important. Other comments are that teachers can explain the writing problem and that may help them more. Therefore, negotiation with teachers is what the students look for. This study shows that students prefer discussing and explaining their problems than just correcting it. The study also suggests that students prefer talking about their topics while writing. Similar findings are reported by Miao, Badger, and Yu (2006), who examine two ESL writing classes, the findings reveal that students adopt more teacher feedback than peer feedback. In the interview, students report that the teacher was more "professional," "experienced," and "trustworthy" than their peers (p. 188). The main complaint about their peer feedback is that their peers do not give accurate responses to the writing and they do not know how to explain the problem. Both studies indicate that students favor oral discussions and negotiation about their writing problems over written comments about these problems.

Another study by Zhao (2010) distinguishes the learners' use of comments from their understanding of peer and teacher feedback (p. 3). Eighteen ESL learners participated in the study to find out whether students understood their teachers' feedback or if they apply it without

understanding. The findings report that students use the feedback comments without understanding their purposes because negotiation is not provided. Also, the teachers discover that their comments are not delivered accurately. Consequently, students' writing has not improved. The following example presents what kind of feedback the teacher provides and how the student responded to this feedback:

The original sentence: Virtually, there is boundless love hidden in fishbone.
 Teacher's comment: **Look up** **meaning?**
 The revised sentence: **Actually**, there is boundless love **revealed by fishbone**.
 (p. 9)

This example shows that 'Jin' applies the teacher's comments without understanding because she does not discuss the comments with him when she is asked to look up the word *virtually*. However, during the interviewing, Jin explained to the researcher how she responded to the feedback as follow:

Researcher: Do you need help with the feedback received in the first paragraph?

Jin: Yes, this one. What is the difference between 'virtually' and 'actually'? I was suggested by Art [the writing teacher] to look up 'virtually'. In our meaning, Art suggested actually. But could not virtually be used in this way? I've used it in this way for a long time. I used 'virtually' and 'actually' interchangeably. I feel they have the same meaning. I used them as alternative to each other to avoid overusing one word. I still feel they are the same.

R: Well, let's look them up in the Oxford advanced Learners' Dictionary. [. . .] You see, *virtually* means almost, or very nearly. For *actually*, there are four meanings. Do you want to read them through?

[Jin read for 45 seconds and looked at me]

R: You see, *actually* is used to emphasis what is true, similar to *in fact*, right?

Jin: Yes. They are different. Thank you. (p. 9)

In her comment about the second part of the sentence, Jin said: "I felt if I used hidden in fishbone, if you translate it into Chinese, it is more meaningful. It does not make that sense in English. I think Art's suggestion was right" (p. 10).

I underlined the word 'meaning' to show that the conversation between Jin and the researcher is about the meaning of the words. When Jin has the chance to negotiate for meaning, she recognizes that words have different meanings in different contexts. The study claims that

teachers and students should have focused their discussion on meaning, as the written feedback is not adequate, allowing students to improve their writing.

Another study by Bitchener, Young and Cameron (2005) investigates whether the type of feedback (directive, explicit or conference feedback) has any effect on writing improvement, in particular on the grammatical level such as: prepositions, past tense, and definite article. The study was conducted on 53 migrant students, who are divided into three treatment groups. Two types of feedback are given to the students: direct written feedback and conference sessions. The conference sessions are provided so that students understand their errors and they have opportunities to ask and negotiate with their teachers about their mistakes. The findings of the study indicate that direct feedback and conference sessions have a significant impact on students' writing accuracy. When students pay attention to their errors as identified by the study such as preposition, past tense and definite article, they learn how to use them correctly in their next writing draft. The study suggests that "classroom L2 writing teachers should provide their learners with both oral feedback as well as written feedback" (p. 202). This suggestion raises awareness on how important negotiation is in writing development when it is conditioned by attention.

A similar study was conducted by Wingate (2010), which focused on the effect of formative assessment that is provided for L2 writing class in a first year undergraduate program. Thirty-nine students were asked to submit their essays online or in class. After that, their peers gave them feedback on their writing, including grammar and ideas. Some feedback comments such as "a more critical/analytical approach is needed" or "too descriptive" are regarded as unhelpful", (p. 522) because some students find them very difficult to understand. The findings of the study reported that "students who had utilized their feedback comments improved in the areas previously criticized" (p. 530). When students consider their peers' feedback, they're writing improved. However, other students who had paid little attention to their feedback comments have fixed problems in their writing. This study encourages the use of formative feedback in the writing class because students have an opportunity to write several times, receive oral/written feedback and concentrate on their writing errors.

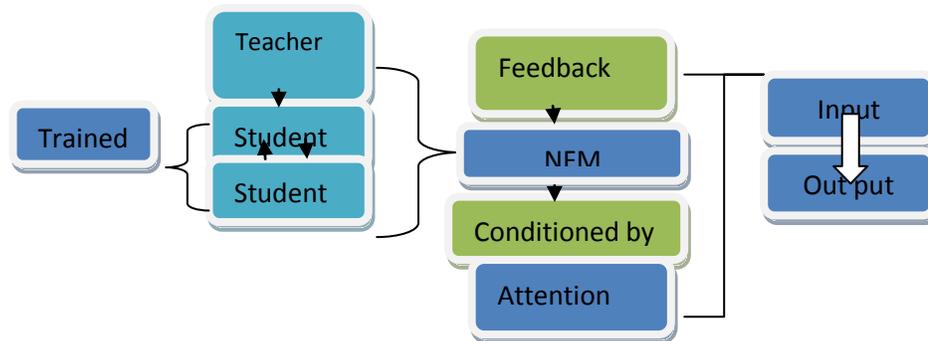
The same findings are reported by Tithcott and Tang (1999). The concern of the study is whether ESL students change their writing as a result of peer review sessions. Like the previous studies, students submit their essays and receive feedback comments. The results indicate that students tend to be positive about their peer's feedback and their writing improved. Students are engaged in conferences to understand their mistakes. These conferences help them to figure out their errors and learn not to repeat their mistakes again. When one of the students is asked about sharing each other's essays, he/she says we appreciated the opportunity to "find out how others are using different words" and "good sentences" (p. 30). During negotiation students are engaged in various tasks like listening and note taking, and this can help them to pay attention to their errors. However, researchers such as Min (2004, 2006, 2008) recommend that students should be well trained in order to assist each other appropriately.

The last study conducted by Gielen, Tops, Dochy, Onghena and Smeets (2010) examined whether peer feedback can be a substitute for teacher feedback when discussion is provided. Gielen et al. divided the students into two groups: experimental and control group. Students wrote essays and were provided with either teacher or peer comments according to their groups. The findings of the study claim that there are no significant differences between both groups. This indicated that peer feedback could be substituted for teacher feedback. The findings also reported that students work more positively with their peers than with their teachers because they

can discuss their ideas informally and find out the appropriate words for specific meanings. Student can also ask their peers when they do not understand the comments.

Although all of the previous findings encourage peer and teacher feedback, only Tithecott and Tang, 1999; Wingate, 2010; Geilen et al., 2010 report positive results regarding students' writing improvement. Other studies by Tsui and NG, 2000; Bitchener et al. 2005; Miao et al. 2006; and Zhao, 2010 show that peer and teacher feedback might be effective in writing if it is conditioned by negotiation and discussion. These studies also reported that the students prefer teachers' feedback comments to students' feedback. The following figure summarizes the feedback process with regard to NFM and attention:

Figure. 3 (Summary of feedback process)



Problems Associated with Feedback and Negotiation for Meaning:

Although peer and teacher review can help students overcome their writing problems, there are some problems associated with feedback and negotiation for meaning in the feedback process. A few of the problems are as follows:

1. **Time:** teachers of ESL writing classes have some concerns about the amount of time they can spend with their students to offer oral and written feedback, and how much time is needed for students to work together during the class. Rollinson (2005) states, "whether feedback is oral or written, the peer response process itself is a lengthy one" (p. 25). Students need to write drafts, and then read each other's drafts. They also need to negotiate the feedback before writing the final paper.
2. **Student/student response:** peer feedback can be seen as untrusted and inaccurate. Some of the previous studies such as Tsui and NG, 2000; Bitchener et al 2005; Yang et al 2006; Zhao, 2010 found out that students do not consider their peers comments. Yang et al (2006) argues that "most common reason for the rejection of peer feedback was that the writers did not accept the feedback for the reason that it seemed "incorrect" to them" (p. 189). Shashok (2008) claims that some peers do not understand the content of the essay. Therefore, they provide inaccurate feedback that misleads the writer and the reader. ESL students feel "instinctively" that only native speakers or better writers can provide a good judgment (Rollinson, 2005, p. 23). Tsui and NG (2000) stated that some students do not respond to their feedback because their peers are not authoritative, which will not harm the students if they do not respond. Tang and Tithecott (1999) maintained that some students argued that it was very difficult to give a negative feedback to their classmates, because they do not want to hurt their feelings (p. 31).

3. **Teacher/student response:** although many comparative studies about teachers and students feedback reveals that students prefer their teachers' comments than their peers, teachers' comments also can be viewed as problematic. Zhao (2010) states that some students view the teacher's comment as a requirement that they have to follow. One student said: "I view teacher feedback as the revision requirement but peer feedback as suggestions. He is a native speaker and he is the teacher . . . Whether the essay is good or not is in the teacher's capable hands" (P.12). This student is mainly influenced by his cultural background where the teacher's comments are not questionable. However, this trust in the teacher leads students to apply the teacher's comments without understanding like the previous example of 'Jin' in (Zhao, 2010). Therefore, teacher/student conferences are significant to assure that students understand the feedback comments.
4. **Oral discussion:** apart from the amount of time that oral discussion and negotiation require during class time, Tang and Tithcott (1999) claimed that few students had some complaints about difficulty to understand the pronunciation of their peers. Moreover, the students recommended written comments with the discussion to fully comprehend the feedback, because this might help to avoid communication failure.

7. Peer Review Training: How Negotiation for Meaning Works

In the quest of some solutions, the following section will discuss the effects of peer review training on students ESL writing. Some of the previous problems can be solved by training students on how to provide oral feedback and how to consider time in the oral discussion part. Firstly, when student are trained for giving feedback and negotiating for meaning, they should be aware of the three Cs (Long's dissertation as cited in Foster and Ohta, 2005, p. 9). Long defines the three Cs as follows:

- Comprehension checks: reviewers should check whether the students understand the comments. Therefore, questions like: *Do you understand?* Is important while discussing feedback comments.
- Confirmation checks: reviewer should make sure that the student is able to apply the feedback comment by asking them to repeat what the reviewer has said.
- Clarification check: unlike confirmation check, at this stage the reviewer provides some clarifications while negotiating. Clarifications include giving examples so the student learns how to apply the comments.

Min (2004) conducted a study to find out whether training students to give feedback would facilitate learning and expand discussions. Similar to Long's three Cs, Min applies four characteristics of comments during training: Clarifying writers' intentions, identifying problems, explaining the nature of problems and making specific suggestions. During training the comments were classified into two categories: one related to global issues such as ideas and organization and the other is related to local problems such as words usage, grammar, spelling, and pronunciation. Trained students then marked each comment according to the four characteristics: clarifying intentions, identifying problem, explaining the problem and make suggestions. These characteristics are presented in the example below:

Comment	"Call for" means to need a particular action or behavior [explain].
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(1)	Did you mean that? [clarify] If not, try to think a more appropriate word to replace it [suggestion].
Comment (2)	I think on this point, the description of the two cultures is not parallel [problem]. (Chinese=the definition of chingkeh (treat friends); America=the way they split bills [explain]) (p.298).

The findings of the study report when students are trained to give feedback, they benefit as reviewers and as writers. As reviewers, the study indicates that students raise awareness on different aspects of language skills. They learn how to organize ideas and construct proper grammar. Through negotiation and interaction, they learn how different cultures have an impact on the students writing. Therefore, some cultural and social practices are taken into consideration. As writers, students learn from their peers how to focus their discussion and their ideas. When negotiation takes place, they learn how to revise their grammatical mistakes. The findings of the study suggest that with proper training, students are capable of providing assistance that is considered critical for development to writers (p. 302). Other studies by Min, 2006 and 2008 report similar results of encouraging peer training before negotiation starts. In her 2006 study, Min argues that training students on how to provide feedback and how negotiate meaning has a positive outcome on students writing.

Conclusion

Students in general and second language learners in particular encounter many problems while writing in the target language. Based on the data set that are examined in this paper, many students believe that their writing has improved when they have a chance to negotiate for meaning and discuss the reviewer's comments orally. This paper has argued the importance of negotiation for meaning when feedback is provided, it also argues the central role of attention while negotiating or interacting. However, research is still needed to consider other factors with negotiation for meaning like grammar. According to the evidences from the previous studies, negotiation is not the only aspect that helps students to improve, but if it is provided during the feedback process students' writing improved.

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