

To Negotiate or Not to Negotiate Meaning: How Do ESL Teachers and Students Decide?

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Research has revealed that negotiation of meaning is rare in the discourse of the language-learning classroom. This scarcity is unfortunate, because negotiation gives students opportunities to improve their practical language skills as they attempt to resolve breakdowns in conversations with their partners. Little is known, however, about the factors that compel a student or teacher to negotiate or to refrain from negotiation in any given situations. To identify such factors, this study analyzes data from a 15-week series of observations, stimulated recall procedures, and interviews with members of an English as second language (ESL) class (a female teacher and nine students). The analysis found six categories of factors: institutional, situational, affective, cultural, and physical factors, and factors related to student receptivity to elements of the class. These findings suggest several methods by which the language teacher can create conditions in the classroom for increased negotiation.

I. BACKGROUND

Research over the last 25 years has taken a substantial interest in *interaction* in second language acquisition (SLA). This research recognizes that successful language learning is closely associated with the quantity and quality of interactions between the language learners and their interlocutors. Of the interactional structures, negotiation of meaning has received particular attention because it has been found to play a facilitative role in the development of L2 learners. *Negotiation of meaning* refers to the modifications that interlocutors make to their interaction to overcome a communication breakdown and re-establish mutual understanding (Long, 1983; Pica, 1994). Researchers claim that such negotiation leads to L2 acquisition by providing opportunities for language learners to receive comprehensible input (Long, 1983), produce comprehensible output (Swain, 1985), and focus their attention on language forms (Gass, Mackey, & Pica, 1998; Pica, 1994).

Research attempts to identify favorable environments for negotiation of meaning have

focused on the effects of various contextual variables on the amount of negotiation. Such variables include task type (Doughty & Pica, 1986; Gass & Varonis, 1985; Pica, 1987; Pica & Doughty, 1985), participant structure (Long & Sato, 1983; Oliver, 2002; Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos, & Linnell, 1996; Pica & Long, 1986; Varonis & Gass, 1985), age (Oliver, 1998), gender (Gass & Varonis, 1986; Pica, Holliday, Lewis, Berducci, & Newman, 1991), and language proficiency (Oliver 2002; Varonis & Gass 1985). For example, some studies (Doughty & Pica, 1986; Long & Sato, 1983; Pica, 1987; Pica & Doughty, 1985; Pica & Long, 1986) have concentrated on teacher-student interactions in L2 classroom settings in an effort to determine the effects of particular types of participant structure on the participants' involvement in negotiation work. The general findings of the studies suggest that teacher-student interactions provide less favorable environments for negotiation compared to other types of NS (native speaker)-NNS (non-native speaker) interactions or to peer interactions in the classroom. These findings raise an important question: Why do teacher and students produce so few negotiation moves?

A review of the relevant literature provides two possible explanations. One is that communication breakdowns rarely take place in teacher-student settings, and therefore there is little opportunity to negotiate. The other explanation is that communication breakdowns do occur, maybe as frequently as in other settings, but that the classroom participants, especially student participants, seldom choose to negotiate.

The findings of Long and Sato (1983) and Pica and Long (1986) support the first explanation. In a series of studies comparing talk used by ESL teachers during teacher-student interactions and talk used by NSs during informal NS-NNS conversations outside the classroom, the authors attributed the smaller amount of negotiation of meaning in classroom settings to two distinctive characteristics of classroom talk: the predominance of display questions (the answers of which are already known to the questioner) and the one-way flow of information from teacher to students. These findings should be considered with caution. The two studies targeted behaviors in elementary-level classes, from which they obtained data and drew their conclusions. Although the authors did not specify the types of questions they observed, teachers in elementary-level classrooms normally ask display questions while conducting pattern drills and metalinguistic talk, such as grammar and vocabulary explanations. Such talk generally involves a one-way flow of information. Consequently, whether the authors' findings are tenable for higher-level classes is a valid concern. In more advanced, communicative classes, participants must deal with referential questions (which request information unknown to the questioner) and engage in two-way information exchanges.

The second possibility, that participants may simply choose not to negotiate, seems to be a better explanation for the relative absence of negotiation in teacher-student interactions. This absence is generally found in L2 classroom settings across proficiency levels. The research (Doughty & Pica, 1986; Pica, 1987; Pica & Doughty, 1985) shows, moreover, that

students are more reluctant to negotiate in teacher-fronted activities than they are in peer activities. This finding has led the researchers to suggest that affective variables and unequal power relationships between students and teachers may discourage classroom negotiation.

These studies have contributed a good deal of what we know about negotiation of meaning in the L2 classroom as they examined negotiation in actual classrooms, as opposed to most other interactionist studies that have been carried out in highly contrived situations, and whose findings have not necessarily been relevant to the classroom and the immediate concerns of teachers. Nevertheless, it appears that second language teachers find little in the research literature to help them encourage their students to make greater efforts to negotiate. There is no in-depth analysis of factors that underlie student unwillingness to negotiate. Although certain learning variables inherent to the classroom settings, such as power relationships, tradition in language teaching, and expectations about the language classroom (Pica, 1994), have been pointed out, their relationships to the scarcity of negotiation in the classroom are mere speculation. They do not, for example, adequately explain the inconsistency of classroom negotiative behaviors; students attempt to negotiate at some times, but they avoid it at other times. More importantly, studies of such variables provide teachers with few specific ideas of how to enhance negotiation in teacher-student classroom interactions. Some studies have suggested more group activities and fewer teacher-fronted activities as methods to increase negotiation, but such methods overlook the importance of the language teacher in the classroom. The teacher, after all, initiates and shapes events through teacher and student interactions, and learning takes place during such interactive work (Hall & Verplaetse, 2000).

In sum, there is little research-based data that describes the conditions and processes by which classroom participants decide to negotiate. As a result, well-grounded suggestions for teaching practice are lacking. In an effort to fill this gap, the current study investigates L2 teacher-student exchanges in greater depth to identify factors that affect the classroom participants' decisions regarding whether to pursue or abandon negotiation of meaning. In so doing, the study attempts to overcome limitations of previous research. First, data for the study is taken from an intact class, where naturally occurring negotiation is found. Most other negotiation studies and even classroom-based negotiation studies have been experimental in nature; that is, the researchers manipulated individual variables (e.g., task type or participation patterns) to determine the effects of the variables on discourse. Special caution should be taken in allowing controlled research findings to guide pedagogical practices because what has been observed in an experimental context may not fully represent the ordinary interaction found in intact classrooms. An approach with more credibility is to observe behaviors inside an undisturbed classroom, where participants engage in diverse activities in an authentic context (although the influence of the observer's presence on the participants' behaviors may not be completely eliminated).

Second, this study focuses more on the unfolding of discourse and the actual process of negotiation of meaning. Most other negotiation studies have focused on categorizing conversational modifications and quantifying their tokens. They fail, however, to examine what really takes place in such interactions and how participants make moment-to-moment decisions in the course of negotiation. By contrast, to give us a better understanding of participants' decision-making processes, the current study delves deeper into actual instances of negotiation within actual linguistic and social contexts. Finally, this study employs a more fine-grained research methodology to enhance the credibility of the findings. Because decision making is largely a mental event, it is only observable indirectly. For that reason, an especially useful tool for examining decision making is stimulated recall. This procedure allows the participants to shed light on their mental operations and helps the researcher determine how a participant initiated and pursued negotiation of meaning at particular moments. As Gass and Mackey (2000) pointed out, this research methodology may move us "from the realm of speculation to the realm of greater certainty" (p. 128).

In summary, the purpose of the present study is to determine factors influencing classroom participants' decisions as to whether or not to negotiate. To do so, the study adopts a contextualized, process-oriented view and utilizes a research methodology compatible with that view. The findings, in turn, are used as a basis for suggesting ways in which L2 teachers can provide more favorable social and linguistic environments for negotiation in their classrooms.

II. METHOD

The present study focuses on how situational and contextual factors in the L2 classroom are interrelated with the process of the participants' decision making as to negotiate or not. To identify such factors, an ESL class was closely observed throughout a semester and the instances of naturally occurring negotiation between teacher and student were analyzed with reference to the context.

1. Participants

Participants were a female teacher and nine students enrolled in an intermediate listening/speaking ESL class at a large university in the U.S. The teacher, Ms. T, a Ph.D. candidate in a TESOL program, had been teaching ESL for more than 5 years. The student participants were five Koreans (Sumi, Insook, Junseok, Taemin, Yongho), two Chinese (Feng, Li-hua), one Colombian (Laura), and one Brazilian (Maria). All students had resided in the U.S. less than a year at the time of data collection. Pseudonyms are used for

all participants.

2. Setting

The class met from 9:00 to 10:30 every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. This class was chosen not only because the teacher showed interest in this study, but also because the class seemed an information-rich site. The focus of the class on listening and speaking gave promise of a large amount of social interaction and negotiation of meaning. The purpose of the class, as stated in the course syllabus, was to improve each student's ability to communicate in spoken English. The teacher particularly stressed the need of students' participation. It seemed that Ms. T tried to create an atmosphere of student freedom rather than tightly control the classroom activities and student participation. For example, Ms. T sometimes let the students bring up discussion topics. Instead of calling on them to respond, she frequently encouraged the students to volunteer comments and ask questions. Often she would put students into groups for collaborative work.

Each class consisted of a variety of activities, including listening to audiotapes, watching videotapes, dictation, pronunciation drills, role play, teacher-centered discussions, pair/group activities, and computer-mediated discussions. The main component of classroom talk consisted of communicative conversation on a variety of topics, with metalinguistic talk, such as grammar explanations, kept to a minimal.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

The primary data sources included weekly class observations, stimulated recall procedures, and participant interviews. Each observed class was videotaped and audiotaped to obtain a more complete record of interactions for reconstructing and analyzing the classroom events later. Taped interactions were transcribed. A stimulated recall technique was used to prompt participants to recall their mental processes when deciding whether or not to negotiate. With audiotapes and videotapes used as stimuli, the participants were asked why they decided to negotiate or not at specific moments of interactions. In addition, a 1½- to 2-hour interview was conducted with each participant to gain an in-depth understanding of beliefs and thoughts about English learning and teaching in general and about teacher-student negotiation of meaning in the classroom in particular. All stimulated recalls and interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed.

The use of multiple information sources provided a broader perspective on negotiation and allowed triangulation of the data for greater reliability. Moreover, it played a crucial role in identifying categories of factors that affected participants' decisions to negotiate. These factors are defined in the following section.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the observations of this class, the participants had ample opportunities to negotiate meaning during teacher-student exchanges. Yet, many instances of communication breakdown did not lead to attempts to negotiate. Although referential questions and two-way information exchanges were abundant in the class, the participants seldom took advantages of these opportunities to negotiate. Interestingly, the teacher and the students revealed sharply contrasting behaviors regarding negotiation. While Ms. T, the teacher, generally attempted to negotiate each time communication broke down, the students tended to be more selective as to whether or not to pursue negotiation of meaning; that is, unlike the teacher, they chose to negotiate in response to only some perceived communication breakdowns.

This section examines six types of contextual factors that affected the decision-making processes of the participants: institutional, situational, affective, cultural, and physical factors, and receptivity. Each type of factor is discussed separately; however, it is well recognized that the factors are correlated and have dynamic effects on classroom interactions.

1. Institutional Factors

Classroom talk evinces many characteristics of institutional discourse that obviously affect the participants' verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Van Lier (2001, p. 92) commented on the institutional constraints and resources prevalent in L2 classrooms:

The classroom thus can be seen to constitute a speech exchange system that has its own rules for turn taking and gives its participants certain rights and duties. The classroom is the primary setting in which talk-for-language-learning is carried out, and as such the classroom demonstrates the norms for proper behavior that underlie the institutional task of language teaching.

As implied by this comment, we can obtain a better understanding of classroom interaction by situating it within its broader, institutional context. In the following subsections, three features of the institutional context are presented with particular respect to its influence on negotiation behavior.

1) Institutional Goal Orientation

One of the underlying characteristics of institutional discourse is that institutional interaction is normally informed by goal orientations (Drew & Heritage, 1992). Thus, Ms.

T's pursuit of negotiation can be interpreted as being linked to an institutional goal of this course, a goal that she projected. Ms. T spells out the goal in her course description: "The purpose of this class is to improve each student's ability to communicate in spoken English." Believing that negotiation of meaning would foster improvements in the students' communicative abilities, Ms. T tried ardently to negotiate and to encourage her students to engage in negotiation. The institutional goal made Ms. T impose a duty on herself of achieving that goal, which in turn shaped her participation patterns.

The students did not seem to share her view, however. Although the students were aware of the course goal of improving their communication ability, they did not view negotiation of meaning as a means for accomplishing that goal. For example, Taemin believed that negotiation of meaning did not help him improve his English. Tamin said, "I think the most important thing to improve my English is to talk much. . . . But fixing communication problems is too difficult and ends in failure so many times because it is beyond my ability. I'd prefer to skip communication difficulties and move to another topic that I can talk about more, rather than wasting time on difficult work" [translated].

The importance that learners attach to given tasks and the appropriate cognitive and metacognitive strategies they apply to those tasks are directly related to their meeting learning goals (Alexander, Schallert, & Hare, 1991; Wigfield, Eccles, & Rodriguez, 1998). In this class, the classroom interactions were informed by an institutional goal understood by all participants; however, the teacher and the students showed contrasting behaviors in attaining the goal at the level of concrete realization. The teacher attempted to negotiate, but the students did not.

2) Institutional Ground Rules

School classrooms are characterized by implicit "ground rules" that the classroom members are expected to share and observe (Mercer, 1995). One of the ground rules pertaining especially to a speaking/listening ESL classroom is that no one student shall monopolize classroom talk. Unlike a content classroom in which students' verbal participation is not directly related to their learning outcome, participation in a speaking/listening classroom plays a significant role in student language development. Therefore, an individual student's dominance of student participation time in a whole-class situation is considered socially unacceptable by the other members in the classroom, although the behavior may have provided the talkative student with many learning opportunities. With regard to balancing individual learning and social benefits, Breen (2001) pointed out that classroom participants are "obliged to work in order to maximise the learning and social benefits they may gain from the discourse while minimising its potential psychological and social costs" (p. 315). He continued, "Their selective work therefore reflects their understanding of, and contributions to, the emerging culture of the particular classroom

group and their own location within it” (p. 315).

The students in Ms. T’s class in general observed the implicit rule that they should behave cooperatively in ways that maintain relative social harmony. Asked why they did not pursue any particular opportunity to negotiate, most expressed their concern about causing social problems in the classroom by their asking too many questions and taking up too much class time with their individual interactions with Ms. T. The following excerpt from an interview with Laura typifies the students’ concern regarding socially inappropriate classroom behaviors: “I can’t ask Ms. T questions every time I don’t understand. I can’t talk with Ms. T for a long time. I would do that if I’m talking to a private tutor. But this is a class. How can I keep asking and talking? That should be disturbing to the class.”

Ms. T also pointed out the difficulty of balancing social benefits and individual learning when she commented on a lengthy interaction with a single student: “That really bothers me, yeah. Maria is a perfect example because she does dominate the class, because she talks a lot, and it’s great to talk a lot, but . . . it becomes a little problematic because I know that, or I believe that, other students don’t like one person dominating the class. They hate that, but I’m kind of in a quandary about how to address that.” Ms. T viewed negotiation with a student as valuable, and thus she worked on negotiations with a collaborative attitude. When she perceived, however, that the negotiation had reached the absolute limit of what was considered appropriate in the classroom, she abandoned further attempts.

3) Institutional Rights and Duties

A classroom has been described as a social context with a large power difference (Kress, 1989). Although power relations in classrooms may change and may be negotiated and fought over by participants, power distribution determined by the institutional context is largely fixed. Cazden (1988) indicated that one of the most important power differences between student and teacher may be the right to speak: “Teachers have the right to speak at any time and to any person; they can fill any silence or interrupt any speaker; they can speak to a student anywhere in the room and in any volume or tone of voice” (p. 54).

Although students’ self-selection of turns was encouraged by Ms. T, the institutionally determined turn-taking system still significantly affected the participants’ discourse. For instance, teachers are generally allowed to interrupt a student’s turn in the classroom context. In this study, Ms. T was also observed to engage in many “intra-turn negotiation” (Boulima, 1999) encounters. *Intra-turn negotiation* refers to a negotiation in which an interlocutor initiates resolution before the other’s turn is finished. The following is an example. Maria is telling the class that she has eaten some traditional Brazilian food called *feijoada* over the past weekend.

Example 1

- 1 Ms. T: Where did you have it? Did you make it?
 2 Maria: No, eh, one, one professor, eh,... lived, lived, eh, live in//
 → 3 Ms. T: //He lives in town, he or she?
 4 Maria: lived in India//
 → 5 Ms. T: //Oh, she, he is /in India/
 6 Maria: / but, / early years, he live in, lived in Brazil.
 7 Ms. T: He has lived in Brazil?
 8 Maria: Yeah, (laughing) he has lived for a long time, and eh, he do this
 9 party every, every year for his student and//
 → 10 Ms. T: //Oh, I see. He lives in Austin, but he had lived in Brazil for a long
 11 time, and so every year he has a Brazilian party?
 12 Maria: Yeah
 13 Ms. T: That sounds fun.
 (two slashes //: abrupt cut-off, slash / /: simultaneous speech)

In lines 3, 5, and 10, Ms. T stepped in to confirm or clarify her understanding before Maria's turns were terminated. Ms. T was able to initiate intra-turn negotiations because she was allowed to interrupt by virtue of her institutional power. In addition, the students' turns were vulnerable to interruption because of their frequent pauses and hesitations. The use of intra-turn negotiation can be effective for successful resolution because, if the identification and repair of a problem is attempted at the moment the problem is perceived, it eliminates efforts to trace through what has been uttered to identify the source of the trouble.

Intra-turn negotiation, however, was rarely found in student-initiated resolution work. Students in general are expected to avoid interrupting a teacher's turn in the classroom. In addition to institutional restraints, it may be much harder for students to cut in during a teacher's utterances, particularly in an L2 classroom, because of the NS/NNS difference in linguistic proficiency. Junseok made this point when he commented on the difficulty of interrupting Ms. T for negotiation: "I want to ask her a question when I don't understand. But she is still talking, and I can't stop her, so I usually wait until she is finished. But by the time she is done, it is often too late to ask a question on what I did not understand" [translated].

The classroom context gives the teacher not only the institutional right, but also the obligation to manage and maintain classroom discourse. On the one hand, because Ms. T was in charge of managing a number of classroom activities, time was an important factor in her decisions whether to pursue any particular negotiation. At times she had to wrap up ongoing negotiation, although it was not completed, and move on to the next activity. On the other hand, her institutional duty of maintaining classroom discourse led to her

attempts to repair communication breakdowns in her efforts to sustain the flow of classroom interaction. In contrast, the individual student, who was relatively free from such obligations, could decide not to pursue negotiation at times without being much concerned about the loss of meaning.

2. Situational Factors

Situational factors refer to “salient features in the immediate speech activity” (Kleifgen & Saville-Troike, 1992, p. 186), which may include the setting, participants, purposes, verbal and non-verbal actions, and so on. Three features that are particularly related to negotiation are discussed: setting, communicative need, and the perceived possibility of successful negotiation.

1) Setting: Small-Group Setting and Whole-Class Setting

Ms. T frequently put the students into small groups. At those times, Ms. T moved from group to group to monitor how they were doing. Whereas in the whole-class setting Ms. T refrained from pursuing lengthy exchanges with single students, in small groups she was often observed to participate in prolonged negotiation with an individual. Her comment in the following is consistent with the observation:

Yeah, I'm more apt to spend more time exploring something, and I'm more apt to pick up on things that I just hear other students say, and take the opportunity to explore something. I'd say I doubt I feel as much time pressure when I have students working in a group. . . . and so I think I do go into more depth in groups. Also, I think it's because it's more personal communication, rather than group communication, and, . . . I think that influences me.

As Ms. T suggests, the shift from the whole-class setting to the small-group setting brought about a drastic change in the participants' interactional patterns. In small groups, the teacher was relieved from institutional constraints to some extent and was able to participate in more personalized communications. Likewise, the students seemed more willing to initiate and pursue negotiation in small groups, even when the repair work was difficult. With the exception of Maria—who expressed no preference between the two settings and who actually showed equally active negotiation behaviors regardless of the setting—all students expressed preference for negotiation in small groups. For instance, Junseok said, “When I don't understand Ms. T's talk, I can't ask the same question more than twice. It is a little embarrassing to show that I still do not understand after Ms. T's repeated explanation. But in a small group, I feel more comfortable to keep trying until I

understand” [translated].

Another possible explanation for the student tendency to prefer negotiation within small groups lies in the students’ interest in particular topics. This interest motivated them to keep pursuing negotiation to capture exact meanings. Whereas interaction in the whole-class discussion was usually initiated by Ms. T’s “general solicit” (Allwright & Bailey, 1991), that is, her throwing the turn open to the whole class, the interactions in small groups were often initiated by the students. Because the students’ initiations were often stimulated by their particular interest in the topic, the students were more likely to have a strong desire to understand. As Feng said,

When I don’t understand Ms. T’s talk in the whole-class setting, I sometimes pretend to understand by just saying “uhuh, uhuh.” But in a small group, I’m more likely to keep telling Ms. T about my non-understanding and to ask her to repeat or explain because I usually start a comment and that’s what I want to talk about and what I want to know about. Also I’m already familiar with the topic to some degree, so I believe I can understand after all if she repeats and explains over and over again.

2) Immediate Communicative Need

Another factor that contributes to the presence of negotiation of meaning is whether the informational exchange in a task is required or optional. Research findings (Doughty & Pica, 1986; Pica, 1987) have revealed that classroom tasks requiring two-way information exchanges, such as solving jig-saw puzzles, are more effective in generating conversational modification than tasks whose information exchanges are optional. The reason is that two-way information-exchange tasks require more precise production for successful completion and consequently make repair work necessary.

In this study, teacher-student interaction in the whole-class environment was more open-ended and conversational. With no immediate communicative need, the students seemed prone to avoid laborious negotiation work. As Taemin stated, “Well, I think it depends on the situation. For example, if I talk about business-related issues with my colleagues at work, I think I have to clarify and explain until we understand each other. But, as you see, we just talk about things like weather or weekend activities. On those topics, what is the thing I MUST understand?” [translated]

An interesting and related finding is that the students had a tendency to participate in more negotiation in (i) group-work-reporting activities and (ii) procedural talk. Negotiation appears in these types of interactional situations because both involve an immediate need for clear understanding. Ms. T often asked the class to carry out group work and then to report the results to the whole class. In the fifth week of the semester, it was observed that

Taemin was trying hard to clarify his meaning and repair Ms. T's misunderstanding when he reported his group's work to the whole class. His effort seemed in contrast with his reluctance to negotiate during previous classes. Asked in a stimulated recall interview why he kept trying to negotiate meaning in this particular instance, Taemin said, "This was group work. So I thought I needed to convey my group's meaning as clearly as possible" [translated]. Because he had temporarily assumed the role as a representative of his group, Taemin took the responsibility of conveying a clear meaning through negotiation.

Procedural talk refers to language used for managing classroom routines and procedures, such as giving homework, providing instructions for classroom activities, and beginning and closing activities. The data revealed that both Ms. T and the students actively participated in negotiation work during this type of talk. Because procedural talk is associated with a strong communicative need, the participants checked, confirmed, and clarified to make sure that they had reached a mutual understanding. Ms. T said, "I try to repeat things often, particularly when I'm giving homework maybe and instructions for an activity. I ask questions like 'Okay, everybody understands?' if I'm not really sure." The students also tended to make clarification requests and confirmation checks more often when Ms. T gave instructions for homework and classroom activities. When Laura was asked to identify the times she was most likely to negotiate non-understandings, she answered, "Well, if it is important, I ask, but if not, I don't ask. For example, when Ms. T explains about how to do homework and some activities, that is important because I have to know."

This finding provides a new insight. Previous negotiation research has given little attention to procedural talk as a productive context for teacher-student negotiation. Instead, most studies have assumed that only well-designed tasks could create an environment for active negotiation. Procedural talk, however, may play an important part in language development because it constitutes a large portion of the teacher's total communicative efforts (Ellis, 1984) and provides classroom participants with a practical purpose for interaction and negotiation.

3) Perceived Possibility of Successful Negotiation

The study revealed that the participants continually monitored the interactions moment by moment and made decisions whether to pursue negotiation based on the possibility that the resolution of any communication problems would be successful. Three factors seemed most relevant to their decision: the possibility of a successful negotiation based on perceived self-knowledge; the possibility of successful negotiation based on perceived other-knowledge; and the possibility of obtaining sources outside the classroom for resolving given communication problems.

(1) Determining the Possibility of Success Based on Perceived Self-knowledge

The students' decisions as to whether to engage in the resolution process relied partly on their metacognitive evaluation of whether their linguistic capacity and content knowledge were sufficient to allow them to cope with the given communication breakdown. In general, the students tended to forgo negotiation if they perceived the given situation was too difficult for them. The following excerpts from the interviews illustrate this tendency.

Junseok: Sometimes I want to ask again about something I don't understand, but explaining what I don't understand to Ms. T is hard work in itself for me. So I don't even try [translated].

Feng: When I don't understand some vocabulary words that Ms. T says, I do not ask questions because I believe I can't understand them clearly even if Ms. T explains again and again. I'd rather use my Chinese-English dictionary. That gives me a clearer meaning. . . . If I'm not familiar with the discussion topic, I'm reluctant to ask Ms. T again because I'm afraid I can't still understand Ms. T's repetition as I don't have background knowledge of the topic under discussion.

Laura: When I don't understand something, I can predict whether it is going to be resolved or not by Ms. T's repetition. For example, if I do not understand only a small part, I'm more likely to ask her to repeat or explain. But if I don't understand the whole thing, I wouldn't ask because I know I still wouldn't understand even if Ms. T tries again and again. It's just a waste of time.

Taemin: You know, we listened to a pre-recorded dialogue telling an American joke about an elephant sitting on a watch and then talked about it in class. I understood the meaning, but I didn't understand why it was a joke. It was not funny at all. I doubted I could understand why it was a joke even if I asked Ms. T again. So, I just thought it's just a cultural difference and skipped it [translated].

As illustrated in the above excerpts, the students continuously monitored the ongoing situation in reference to their own speaking ability, listening ability, topic knowledge, and cultural knowledge. Such self-evaluations, in turn, provided a basis on which they made negotiation-related decisions.

(2) Determining the Possibility of Success Based on Perceived Other's Knowledge

The students' judgment of Ms. T's knowledge also influenced their decisions as to

whether to withdraw from or pursue their ongoing negotiation. If the students perceived that Ms. T lacked knowledge of the topic under discussion, which was frequently about their own cultures, they tended to terminate negotiation. Apparently, they believed that the breakdown could not be resolved despite their best efforts because of her lack of knowledge in the area.

At times when students made decisions based on their perception of Ms. T's topic knowledge, Ms. T made decisions based on her perception of the students' lack of the linguistic resources to manage the problematic situations. As Ms. T said in an interview,

At some point, no matter how much I explore it, I realize that this is not going to happen, because probably the vocabulary is just not there. Or, in the case of pronunciation problems, no matter how many times I ask for clarification of pronunciation issues, it is often still problematic. I know that no matter how many times I ask again, I'll still be struggling in my understanding. . . . So then, yeah, sometimes, I make some kind of positive statement about some aspect of what I've understood, and then go on to something else.

Successful negotiation requires the collaboration of both interlocutors. Therefore, as illustrated above, the participants continuously monitored their interlocutors' current knowledge level in the course of negotiation. If they believed, based on their metacognitive evaluations, that their interlocutors did not have sufficient competence or knowledge to conduct the ongoing negotiation work in a collaborative way, they abandoned the effort.

(3) Determining the Possibility of Obtaining Sources Outside of the Classroom

When the students had difficulty in understanding Ms. T's talk, they had to decide whether to ask questions. These decisions, in turn, depended on whether they felt they could obtain answers from an outside source. For instance, as Maria said,

If I believed I could get an answer to my question outside of the class, I wouldn't ask Ms. T. . . . I often write down words I don't understand to remember and look up them in a dictionary later. But as long as Ms. T doesn't write them down on the board, I'm not sure if those words are correct because I depend solely on my ears. The other day, I didn't understand "wheel" Ms. T said, so I wrote it down on my notes, but I was not sure if it was correct. So I asked her, and, oh, my, it was totally wrong. So, yeah, if I think I have to ask at the moment, otherwise no way to know it, I would ask.

The students pursued negotiation if they perceived that knowledge of the topic under discussion could be learned only in the current situation. As Feng reported,

I don't usually ask vocabulary questions because I think I can ask my husband or look those words up in a dictionary. Vocabulary is not important. You can learn by yourself outside of the class. But if I don't understand what Ms. T's talking about some topics like American culture and American ways of living, I would ask questions, because that is what I really want to know and it's not something you can learn from books.

Overall, it appeared that the students preferred not to negotiate with Ms. T if they believed they could use outside sources to resolve their non-understanding problems.

3. Affective Factors

Signaling an occurrence of communication breakdown in L2 classrooms may be a potentially face-threatening act for a student, because a communication breakdown is usually attributed to the student's lack of proficiency in either comprehension or production. In other words, students are likely to assume the blame for both sides of a non-understanding: their own non-understanding and the teacher's non-understanding. Furthermore, repair work may put students in a discomfiting or anxiety-provoking situation in which they have to disclose their linguistic incompetence. Extensive negotiation can especially affect students' emotions in a classroom in which conversation is "performed" (Ulichny, 1996) in front of the whole class, in comparison with the usual one-on-one interactions outside the classroom. Interview data showed that Ms. T's decisions as to whether to pursue negotiation were closely related to her awareness of affective aspects influencing the students. The following excerpt is drawn from an interview with Ms. T.

Sometimes I don't pursue it when maybe I have tried a few times to clarify my meaning. I'm not getting it, and I'm maybe afraid that I'm embarrassing my students by asking more questions. I become increasingly concerned, from the student's perspective actually, because I have this idea that the longer it takes to correct a miscommunication, then maybe the more anxious the students become. So I become increasingly anxious about that outcome. I won't pursue it then. . . . Sometimes I will pretend I understand—not that I'll say, "Oh, I understand" if I don't—but I kind of move quickly to something else, or, make a comment about the part I did understand to give some validation to the students so that the students feel they have had some successful communication.

Clearly, Ms. T's decisions and behaviors regarding negotiation were influenced by her concern about the students' emotions and feelings. On the other hand, the students generally seemed to believe that their emotions did not significantly affect their

negotiation-related decisions. The students reported that, although their experience of communication breakdowns gave them negative emotions, those feelings were not generally strong enough to prevent them from negotiating. For instance, in response to my question about the relationship between her feelings and her negotiation behavior, Insook said,

When I don't understand Ms. W's talk, I usually let it go by. But it's not because I'm embarrassed by asking questions in front of class. I know we are all bad [laughing]. We are all at the same level in terms of English proficiency. I think they understand what I understand, and they don't understand what I don't understand. So not being able to understand is not something to be embarrassed about, I think [translated].

Insook's comment indicates that the students were well aware of the nature of the ESL classroom, where communication breakdowns are naturally expected and linguistic incompetence is shared by the members. They took these difficulties for granted, rather than be embarrassed by them.

This finding was somewhat surprising in that it contradicted general expectation. Although the students generally reported that their emotions were not closely linked to their negotiation-related decisions, research and classroom experience give clear evidence that affective factors have significant effects on language learning and classroom performance. The students may not have been entirely conscious of their own emotions, or they may have been reluctant to fully express their emotions to the researcher. Further corroborating evidence is needed to validate this finding.

4. Cultural Factors

An L2 classroom is "the meeting point of various subjective views of language, diverse learning purposes, and different preferences concerning how learning should be done" (Breen, 1985, p. 144). Students from different cultural backgrounds bring their own expectations of ways of learning, teacher-student relationships, and interactional patterns, all of which have been formed through their own learning and classroom experiences. Previous research reports, for instance, that Asian students have different turn-taking systems (Sato, 1982) and different learning styles (Nelson, 1995) from those representing American classroom norms.

In this study, Insook has a different cultural view of the teacher-student relationship, one that had been shaped by many years of experience as a student in Korea. This cultural difference caused her to avoid the one-on-one interactional situations with Ms. T that would be necessary for initiating negotiation. Insook said, "I don't usually ask Ms. T to

explain again. I feel a little uncomfortable with talking to the teacher in class. . . . It is just because Ms. T is a teacher and I'm a student. In Korea, we don't usually interact with teachers in classrooms. When I was in Korea, if I didn't understand something, I used to ask my classmates." While it may be true that institutional contexts impose a hierarchical teacher-student relationship in American classrooms, in Korean culture that relationship is far more distant. As a result, Korean students may work hard to avoid initiating interaction with a teacher in a classroom. Even though Insook may have known that Korean cultural norms did not hold true in the ESL class, her culturally shaped views were still strong enough to mediate her negotiation patterns. In this way, cultural differences may significantly affect student negotiation-related behaviors in many ESL classes, where students represent a wide range of cultural backgrounds.

5. Physical Factors

It was found that the students' physical state affected their decisions whether to pursue negotiation. This category seemed important because it may suggest that L2 performance is more closely related to learners' physical conditions than L1 performance is, probably because of the greater cognitive burden and effort required for L2 work. Maria and Laura mentioned they did not attempt to negotiate when they felt physically tired from overwork. Laura said, "Sometimes when I've worked all day long, I'm so tired in class on the next day. Then, I just don't want to listen, don't want to understand." Yongho pointed to his drowsiness in the morning as one of the reasons he often did not negotiate: "I'm not a morning person. It's hard to concentrate in class. So often I just let it go even if I don't understand. But I feel much better in my afternoon classes."

6. Receptivity

Receptivity was an infrequently attested category, but it is included because it seemed to provide important insights not otherwise gained. Allwright and Bailey (1991) used *receptivity* as a cover term for a variety of concerns. They defined *receptivity* as "a state of mind, whether permanent or temporary, that is open to the experience of becoming a speaker of another language, somebody else's language" (p. 157). They discussed those aspects of receptivity that are most directly related to classroom experiences, including receptivity to the teacher, to fellow learners, to the teacher's way of teaching, to course content, to teaching materials, to being a successful language learner, and to the idea of communicating with others.

The concept of receptivity provides a framework to explain Sumi's low levels of participation and negotiation. The following is Sumi's comment about this class.

I was in the Level 2 class last semester, but students in that class were better than students in this class in terms of their English proficiency. I was so surprised when I found that the students, especially ones from South American countries, did not know very basic grammar and vocabulary words. You know, if other students in your class are better than you, it encourages you to improve yourself. It is stimulating. But this class just discourages me from participating in activities and even coming to the class. We have to spend time talking about basic stuff when they ask the teacher. I'm learning little.

Sumi's low motivation to participate and negotiate can be traced to a lack of receptivity to her classmates and to the class. A student's lack of receptivity may be a serious problem, because it is not a momentary emotional state, but rather a persistent trait that rarely changes over time, as was observed in Sumi's case.

What is noteworthy about Sumi's comment is that she identified characteristics of students from a particular culture as the cause of her lack of motivation to participate in class activities. The students from South America clearly were in the minority in the class (two out of nine students, Maria from Brazil and Laura from Colombia), and perhaps Sumi was oversensitive to those students; that is, perhaps she was not accustomed to and was not ready to accept the different participation styles, different accents, and different ways of talking that Maria and Laura employed. Receptivity to the particular cultures of fellow learners may be an unexplored issue in second language classrooms that include students from many different cultural backgrounds.

IV. SUMMARY AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

A principal contribution of this study is its penetration into the reasons for the scarcity of negotiation in the L2 classroom. Without reasons, L2 teachers cannot effectively guide their students into more active negotiation. The value of this study, therefore, is that it provides well-grounded suggestions for promoting classroom interaction. Some factors related to the presence of negotiation are inherently a part of the classroom context and may be hard to change, even with the participants' conscious efforts. Other factors, however, are within the participants' control and can be more flexibly reworked. Thus, any practical suggestion should be based on an understanding of the social context of the classroom and the constraints and possibilities within that context. In addition, because the findings of this study are based on data gathered from a single classroom, it should be remembered that some of the findings may be specific to the local context of the present study, while other findings may be more generally applied across settings. In the following paragraphs, these findings are briefly summarized and some suggestions associated with

each are presented.

For institutional settings, three main features were discussed. First, while the teacher's active negotiation was motivated by her linkage of negotiation to the institutional goal of improving communicative competence, the students did not seem to appreciate that linkage and consequently were not ardently involved in negotiation for its own sake. Second, the students often did not attempt to negotiate because they were well aware of an implicit ground rule: Do not monopolize classroom talk. Third, whereas the institutionally determined turn-taking system favored the teacher during negotiation work, the same system deterred students from initiating negotiation at perceived optimal moments. Additionally, while the institutional duty of managing a number of classroom activities within a given time prevented the teacher from participating in prolonged negotiation at particular times, her responsibility for maintaining the flow of classroom discourse led her to attempt negotiation at other times. The students, who were relatively free from any obligation to maintain ongoing discourse, were more selective in their negotiation work.

As van Lier (2001) noted, this institutional influence over the participants' language use is so powerful that any effort to alter it often fails. Some attempts, however, can be made at least in the details of class leadership. For example, teachers can explain to the students the potential of negotiation of meaning for language development, because students tend to embrace a certain activity if they see a connection between the activity and their ultimate learning goals. Another possible way teachers can incorporate negotiation of meaning into the turn-taking system is to monitor their own talk more consciously. For example, by pausing frequently, even within a turn, a teacher can allow the students to jump in at appropriate times to indicate their non-understanding. Calling on students can be another way to give them more responsibility for the flow of ongoing discussions and clarification of meaning. It was somewhat surprising and also suggestive to hear that the students in this study wanted to be called on and pushed to speak; however, this strategy should be used with a full consideration of affective issues.

The data suggested that situational factors played an important role in the participants' decision making. Situational factors included three major subcategories. First, in comparison with a whole-class discussion situation, a group setting provided an environment in which the students and the teacher were more inclined to pursue negotiation. Second, open-ended conversations in class relieved students from any immediate need to communicate clearly and thus allowed the students to avoid engaging in negotiation work. In contrast, procedural talk and group-work-reporting activities pushed the students to make an effort to negotiate by creating a strong communicative need at given moments. Third, the participants' decisions about whether to pursue negotiation depended on their moment-by-moment monitoring of the situation and their metacognitive judgment as to the possibility of success if they should attempt to resolve a communication problem.

Some implications can be drawn from these findings. First, teachers can take opportunities

during group work to engage in one-on-one negotiation with single students in depth, when both the teacher and student are freed to some extent from institutional and social constraints. Teachers may be able to have students take a more active role in interacting and negotiating, for example, by asking the students to reformulate what they understand and waiting until the students finish their turn, rather than interrupting and filling the gap immediately after a communication breakdown. Second, tasks having immediate communicative purposes need to be designed to motivate students to make an effort to produce successful communications. A wider range of activities, in addition to the jigsaw task as suggested in previous research, may be devised. A good example may be the group-work-reporting activity described in the present study. Third, to move beyond their current level of comprehension or production, students should be encouraged and even pushed (Swain, 1985) to make attempts to resolve communication problems, rather than give up, despite their perceived insufficiency of linguistic resources. Teachers may assist students to overcome their limitations by teaching “compensation strategies” that enable students to use the language for either comprehension or production despite limitations in knowledge (see Oxford, 1990, for a detailed discussion and list of strategies).

With reference to affective factors, the data showed that the teacher’s decisions and behaviors regarding negotiation were affected by her concern about the students’ emotions and feelings. On the other hand, the students themselves did not consider affective factors significant in their decision-making processes. Nevertheless, this finding may be difficult to generalize because affective factors can influence individuals in different ways. Indeed, many studies on affective factors have suggested their enormous impact on language learning and classroom performance. Teachers’ assurances that signaling and repairing non-understanding are appropriate in classrooms may decrease students’ negative feelings resulting from their experiences with communication difficulties. The message needs to be shared that “negotiation cannot be interpreted as repair of imperfect or failed communication; rather, it must be regarded as an important component of the learning experience” (Musumeci, 1996, p. 321).

According to the analysis, both cultural and physical factors greatly influenced the students’ negotiation-related decisions. Some students were prone to avoid negotiation because they were influenced by their cultural concepts of and experiences with teacher-student interaction and classroom negotiation. Physical tiredness was also negatively related to student participation in negotiation. These two factors are difficult for the teacher to influence; however, simply being aware of their effects on student negotiation would help teachers design classroom activities that better accommodate these factors.

Finally, receptivity to features of the class appeared to affect the degree of student participation. In this study, for example, an individual student, Sumi, refused to participate and negotiate because she was not receptive to some of her fellow learners and

subsequently the class itself. Stated simply, students are more likely to participate and negotiate if they are receptive to classroom-related factors. Teachers can adjust to the students' receptivity to some aspects of the classroom, such as the teacher's way of teaching, the teaching materials, and course content. To be successful, a teacher may need to address students' expectations, needs, and complaints first. Meeting everyone's different needs and expectations may be impossible, however, so the next best solution may be to provide opportunities for each student to benefit in his or her own way of learning. This approach requires that teachers devise a variety of activities or teaching methods. Also, teachers in second language classrooms, as opposed to foreign language classrooms, should frequently take the role of mediator to help students from different backgrounds to understand and be receptive to each other's ways of interacting and participating.

As a final remark, it is important to note that these pedagogical suggestions should be considered with discretion. Although negotiation may play a fundamental role in language development, it does not always have a favorable outcome. Teacher-student negotiation is essentially a social act embedded in a social context. Language learning and social circumstances may not necessarily coincide. In fact, negotiation can sometimes be viewed "as inefficient, embarrassing, or even inappropriate" (Musumeci, 1996, p. 321). Therefore, balancing pedagogical and social concerns may be a major challenge for teachers, but it can be achieved most effectively and successfully only by teachers who understand well the local situation and their students.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Negotiating meaning is a juggling act that requires the participants to make moment-by-moment decisions based on their local knowledge of the situation and general knowledge of the context. This study presented an investigation of factors that affect the classroom participants' decisions on whether to pursue negotiation. Six categories were discussed in particular: institutional factors, situational factors, affective factors, cultural factors, physical factors, and receptivity. The data suggest that these factors are intricately involved in the participants' decision-making processes. An awareness of the dynamic influence of a range of factors will lead second language teachers to seek practical ways of promoting negotiation in their classrooms. Although the study presented here is limited to a particular context, the findings should enhance our understanding of the decision to negotiate, an important but relatively unexplored aspect of SLA.

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