

Exploring meaning negotiation patterns in synchronous audio and video conferencing English classes in China

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Abstract. This work-in-progress doctoral research project aims to identify meaning negotiation patterns in synchronous audio and video Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) environments based on the model of CMC text chat proposed by Smith (2003). The study was conducted in the Institute of Online Education at Beijing Foreign Studies University. Four dyads each performed four information gap tasks through synchronous audio/video CMC environments. Target lexical items were especially ‘embedded’ in the tasks to elicit negotiated interactions within dyads. The online classes were screen recorded as multimodal data for analysis. Then, participants took a face-to-face, one-to-one video stimulated recall interview to recall their thoughts during the negotiated interactions and to share their attitudes towards Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in synchronous audio/video CMC environments. Negotiated interactions have been transcribed and are being analyzed based on Smith’s (2003) model first, but new patterns may be identified from further analysis.

Keywords: meaning negotiation, CMC, synchronous audio and video conferencing, TBLT, China.

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1. Introduction

Varonis and Gass (1985) define meaning negotiation episodes as responses to instances of non-understanding, and propose a model summarizing meaning negotiation patterns between non-native speakers. Their model consists of four steps: T→I→R→RR. A *Trigger* (T), is an utterance that causes non-understanding for the hearer. Then, the hearer signals non-understanding through an *Indicator* (I). A *Response* (R) phase is when the speaker fixes the non-understanding. Finally, the hearer makes a *Reaction to the Response* (RR). Based on Varonis and Gass (1985) and other studies on meaning negotiation patterns, Smith (2003) summarizes the possible subcategories of each stage of a meaning negotiation routine (Table 1), which have been widely used for analyzing meaning negotiation patterns in different CMC contexts.

Table 1. Subcategories of negotiation routine stages

Trigger	Indicator	Response	Reaction to Response
Lexical	Global	Minimal	Minimal
Syntactic	Local	RT + Lexical	Metalinguistic talk
Discourse	Inferential	Rephrase/	Task appropriate response
Content		Elaboration	Testing Deductions

Smith (2003) also expands Varonis and Gass's (1985) model by adding two more possible stages: *Confirmation* (C) and *ReConfirmation* (RC), and listing several possible pathways for a negotiation routine. These stages occur very often in computer-mediated negotiation interaction due to learners' particular demand for explicit acknowledgements of the understanding/non-understanding in CMC text chat environments.

As technology and CALL developed, synchronous audio and video CMC have become widely used for online language teaching. However, oral and visual interactions are very different from written interactions in terms of modality, language use, and participants' emotions and attitudes, all of which may lead to different ways of communicating and of language learning. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how meaning is negotiated in these new online learning environments.

Building on Smith's (2003) model, this study aims to contribute to the development of a more suitable framework for meaning negotiation patterns in synchronous audio/video CMC environments and hopefully gain insights into how languages can be learned through online peer interactions.

2. Method

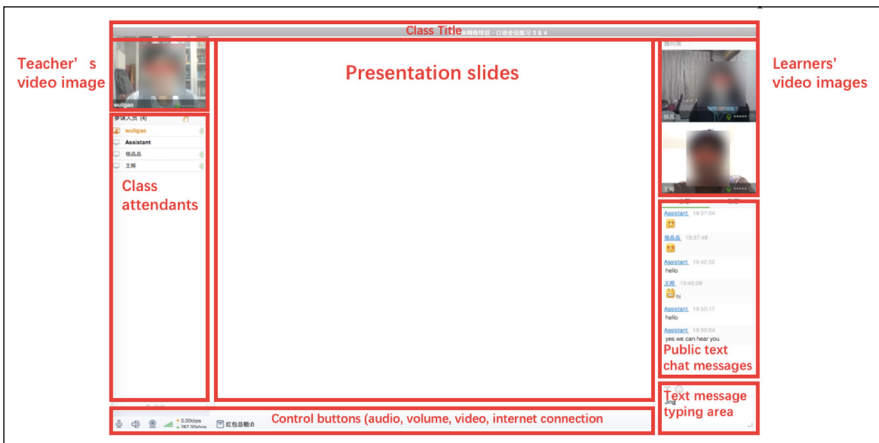
2.1. Context

This study was conducted in the Institute of Online Education (also called ‘BeiwaiOnline’) at Beijing Foreign Studies University, a prestigious higher education institution specialized in teaching foreign languages. BeiwaiOnline provides both independent online language courses and qualification courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Students at BeiwaiOnline are usually full time employed adult learners and study online in their spare time to gain a better degree, expand their knowledge, and improve their language ability.

This project was designed by the first author as her doctoral research project. It was provided as a free online speaking course and students’ performances were not related to their assessment at the school. The coauthor (Jinlan Tang) organized a team for carrying out the project, while the two other co-authors (Ligao Wu and Chen Li) were responsible for the delivery of this online course. Their role in this study was to give task instructions, facilitate task interactions when needed, and offer post-task feedback to participants.

All eight participants were recruited from BeiwaiOnline and all have at least half a year online language learning experience. They are all female adult learners with proficiency levels of around B2.

Figure 1. BeiwaiOnline video conferencing system



The BeiwaiOnline video conferencing system (Figure 1) consists of presentation slides, online teacher's video image, class attendants' information, students' video images, students' text chat area, and some control buttons. The online teacher has the overall control of the system. He/She can give access to audio/video channels to certain students for verbal or multimodal interactions with online teachers and peers.

2.2. Procedures

The data were collected in three stages (Table 2). The first stage was designed to familiarize participants with their peers and with audio/video peer interaction, and to test their general English proficiency and their knowledge of target lexical items. Then, each dyad performed two types of tasks (spot-the-difference tasks and problem solving tasks) in both audio and video mode respectively. In each dyad, two participants had different task sheets. They were asked to describe the pictures or items in their own task sheet to each other and together work out the differences or make decisions.

Table 2. Research procedures

Stages	Session	Content	Data
Stage 1: Preparation	SCMC Session 1	Introduction, pairing, ice-breaking; pre-task vocabulary test (video only)	Not used for analysis.
	SCMC Session 2	Mock IELTS speaking test; opinion gap tasks (audio & video)	
Stage 2: Main tasks	SCMC Session 3	Spot-the-difference tasks (1 in audio & 1 in video)	8 hours of screen video recordings
	SCMC Session 4	Problem solving tasks (1 in audio & in video)	
Stage 3: Interviews	Face-to-face interview	a) Video stimulated recall interview about negotiated interactions b) Normal interview on students' opinions and background	12 hours of audio recordings

The target lexical items were 'embedded' into the tasks so that students had to negotiate the meaning of these words to complete the tasks. Their performances were recorded as the main data for analyzing meaning negotiation patterns in audio/video Synchronous CMC (SCMC) classrooms. After each task session, the researcher watched the recordings, identified meaning negotiation stances, and prepared related questions for the video stimulated recall interview. The interview aimed to gain more information about students' thoughts during negotiated interactions, their previous language learning experience, and their

opinions about peer audio/visual interaction and task-based language learning. The interview was necessary because why students performed the way they did is as, if not more, important than how they performed in negotiated interactions in this environment.

3. Preliminary observations and conclusions

According to interview data, all participants preferred video interactions to audio when there were no technical issues. Although none of them had done video or audio peer interactions in online classes before this project, they had done audio/video chat in daily life through social networking tools, so they were able to fit in with this form of communication quickly. Many students think visual elements including gaze, hand gestures, and body movements (nodding, shaking head) can offer important information in negotiated interactions, from which they were able to tell their peers' (non)understanding. However, two students indicated that even in the video mode, they didn't often look at the screen because they had to completely focus on how to express themselves clearly in English. It seems that video mode was better than audio for them because it offers them the availability to see visual elements from their peers, but whether to use this function is a choice they make consciously, according to specific circumstances. Some students also complained there were more technical issues in video than in audio mode. In summary, for students to negotiate meaning smoothly in SCMC, being able to talk to and hear each other clearly is their priority. Non-verbal elements in video mode can offer them important additional information which can facilitate the meaning negotiation process.

Another finding is that students held contradictory attitudes towards meaning negotiation. While most students were happy and able to negotiate the meaning of new lexical items, some showed strong resistance to it. For example, when one student came across something she did not understand, she began looking it up in an online dictionary even when her peer was actually explaining the meaning of the word to her. During the interview, these students emphasized that they didn't feel embarrassed but they wanted to take responsibility for their own learning. Interestingly, there is no strong correlation between learners' English proficiency and their attitudes towards and their ability in meaning negotiation. Those who were resistant seemed to view English as a subject that needs serious learning, whereas those who were good at meaning negotiation tended to hold the view that English is a tool for communication that can be acquired through oral interactions.

Building on Smith (2003), further analysis will be done to uncover if there are any new meaning negotiation patterns in SCMC audio and video environments, and what the differences are in meaning negotiation patterns between the two modes.

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