

**NEGOTIATION OF MEANING IN TASK-BASED  
INTERACTION AMONG NON-NATIVE LEARNERS  
OF ESL**

**NOR'AIN HADHIRA BINTI AYOB**

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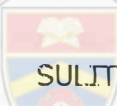
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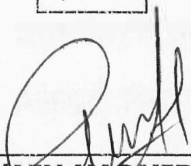
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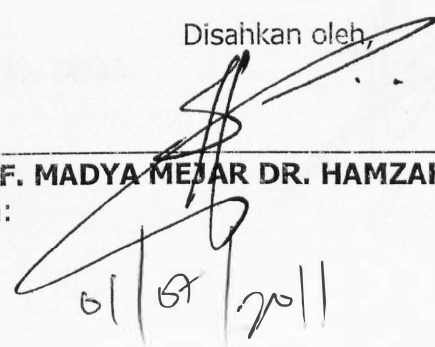
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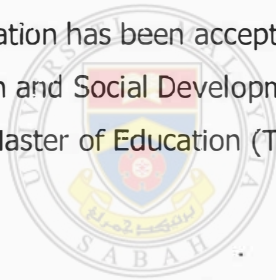
**NAME : NOR'AIN HADHIRA AYOB**

**MATRIC NO : PT20098534C**

**TITLE : NEGOTIATION OF MEANING IN TASK-BASED INTERACTION  
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**DECLARED BY:**

**1. SUPERVISOR**

ASSOC. PROF. MEJAR DR. HAMZAH MD. OMAR

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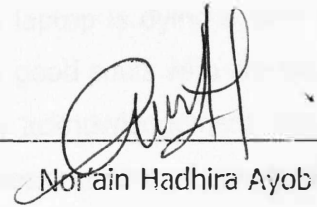
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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the material in this dissertation is my own except for quotations, excerpts, equations, summaries and references, which have been duly acknowledged.

30 June 2011



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'I want to thank nobody but myself for completing this'. I have yet to come across this type of acknowledgement and hence, acknowledgement is the usual pretty boring stuff. You thank everyone (and everything) for the completion of your work and sometimes even inanimate objects on your desk, especially if your laptop is dying a slow death. I guess because the truth is, you owe your work to many good souls who are fated to be your academic victims (=collaborators). In my case, my acknowledgement should have been as long as the dissertation itself, for there is countless number of people who have helped made this possible. To all of you, I owe my heartfelt gratitude.

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## ABSTRACT

### NEGOTIATION OF MEANING IN TASK-BASED INTERACTION AMONG NON-NATIVE LEARNERS OF ESL

This case study investigated the negotiation of meaning among non-native learners of ESL in task-based interaction. The investigation was guided by two research questions: (1) how do learners negotiate for meaning in task-based interaction? (2) how does negotiation of meaning help learners in completing the task? This study was conducted among four students majoring in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) from a public higher learning institution in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. The students' interaction during the task execution were recorded and later transcribed. The categories of negotiating moves were based on Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1980). The transcripts of students' interaction were then used to guide stimulated recall sessions and one focus group interview session. The findings of this study suggest that learners do negotiate for meaning in task-based interaction. However, learners' intentions vary greatly from the functions often associated with particular negotiating moves. The functions of negotiating moves found in this study can be categorized into three major categories; (i) addressing input incomprehensibility, (ii) responding emotively to previous utterance and (iii) encouraging each other to interact. It was also found that negotiation of meaning is helpful in completing the task since it helps learners to resolve communication breakdown and misunderstanding; and to achieve mutual decision. Nevertheless, negotiation of meaning is considered optional since learners were found to be able to successfully complete tasks even when negotiation was considered unsuccessful. Learners attributed this to two factors; (i) group's social dynamics and (ii) perception of task's priority. The insights gained from this study suggest that although negotiation of meaning is necessary for task completion, it is not definitive of task completion.

## **ABSTRAK**

*Kajian kes ini dijalankan untuk menyiasat 'negotiation of meaning' (rundingan makna) di kalangan pelajar-pelajar Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua ketika menjalankan aktiviti bercirikan 'task-based learning' (berpandukan tugas). Kajian ini berasaskan kepada dua persoalan kajian iaitu: (1) bagaimanakah pelajar-pelajar berunding ketika menjalankan aktiviti bercirikan 'task-based'? (2) bagaimanakah 'negotiation of meaning' dapat membantu pelajar-pelajar menyelesaikan aktiviti? Kajian ini dijalankan terhadap empat orang pelajar Pengajian Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa Kedua (TESL) daripada sebuah institusi pengajian tinggi awam di Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Kategori langkah-langkah rundingan ('negotiating moves') adalah berdasarkan "Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1980)". Dapatan kajian ini mendapati tujuan pelajar-pelajar menggunakan sesuatu jenis langkah rundingan didapati tidak sama dengan tujuan yang selalu dikaitkan dengan langkah rundingan tersebut. Fungsi langkah rundingan dalam kajian ini dapat dibahagikan kepada tiga kategori; (i) menangani ketidakfahaman input, (ii) menunjukkan reaksi beremosi terhadap input atau output, dan (iii) memberi galakan kepada rakan untuk berinteraksi. Kajian juga mendapati bahawa rundingan makna ('negotiation of meaning') membantu pelajar-pelajar untuk menyelesaikan tugas kerana ia membantu pelajar menyelesaikan masalah komunikasi dan ketidakfahaman; dan juga mencapai kata sepakat. Walaubagaimanapun, rundingan makna ('negotiation of meaning') adalah pilihan kerana walaupun rundingan makna tidak berjaya, tugas masih dapat diselesaikan. Pelajar-pelajar berpendapat ini berkaitan dengan dua faktor; (i) dinamik sosial dalam kumpulan dan (ii) persepsi tentang kepentingan tugas.*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>NfM</b>	Negotiation of Meaning
<b>NNS</b>	Non-native speaker
<b>ESL</b>	English as a Second Language



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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

Language learning is a complex cognitive process that is affected by psychological and sociocultural factors. As the ultimate goal of learning a language is often associated with being able to interact in that language, interaction is often cited in research as promoting second language acquisition. Interaction is seen as an avenue whereby input can be made accessible to learners and this input, will hopefully be noticed by learners in order for them to develop linguistically. As suggested by van Lier (1988: 91), language development is a thread that runs through the social interaction learners engage in, at times visible, at times not. One area of interaction that is arguably very promising in addressing learners' language development is negotiation of meaning (NfM henceforth).

When Long (1980) first introduced this concept, he cited negotiation, which includes input, is necessary but insufficient for language acquisition. Research on NfM has thus focused on many aspects of NfM from different perspectives. For learners especially the ones learning in a context where English is not the first language, NfM opportunities are almost always provided in the classroom language tasks. Almost always, learners are driven to interact in the target language in order to complete the tasks. Since task completion is a highly collaborative activity, NfM is purported to be in abundance in task-based interaction. This suggests that language learning is internally influenced and may be driven through interaction (Dufficy, 2004).

## 1.2 Background of the study

Tracing the historical development of interactional studies, the early stage of research in this area was sparked by the booming interest in communicative language teaching (CLT henceforth) during the 1970s (Brumfit & Johnson, 1979). With this development, isolated learning of language structure seemed inadequate in language teaching and that this needed to be accompanied by a concern to develop the ability and capacity to express meanings. Interaction, then, was seen as crucial and some even argued strongly on its necessity and sufficiency based on the notion that it provided learners with comprehensible input; a concept popularized by Krashen (1985, as cited in Pica, 1994), which was seen as a prerequisite for SLA.

As pedagogic developments based on the concept of vitality of interaction began to take central stage, task-based approaches became a remarkable innovation, partly due to the manner in which it was introduced; a full-fledged report on its successful large-scale implementation in an EFL context that is Bangladesh (Prabhu, 1987 as cited in Skehan, 2003). Task-based approaches were (and still are) seen as providing opportunities for learners to interact in a systematic way. Apart from serving the purpose of a research instrument, task is also seen as a feasible pedagogical idea. In fact, in the earlier stage of task-based instruction, some even envisaged it as a pathfinder to language pedagogy, believing that the 'silver bullet' was finally discovered. Nevertheless, as more research unveils both strengths and deficiencies of task-based teaching and learning, this conviction slowly wanes away.



Despite this revelation, it is too premature to dismiss the whole enterprise of task-based teaching and learning. On the contrary, the area has opened up a lot of new inquiries upon the process of learning. This is due partly to the different research approaches towards task-based teaching and learning, with special attention given to interaction. Task-based interaction has been used to study areas of task types and their effects on learning and also has been analysed to provide comprehensible data of classroom practice and consequent learners' language production. More recently, it is used to study learners; who are undeniably the main consumers of the research done and ironically, always treated like mere 'lab rats'. Acknowledging the highly-prescriptive nature of SLA research, it is only recently that the interests in seeking participants' perspectives on this process become central to researchers, especially the ones working from the sociocultural dimension (e.g. Appel & Lantolf, 1994; Lantolf, 1996; Brooks, Donato & McGlone, 1997, & Samuda, 2000, as cited in Ellis, 2003).

Addressing the multi-faceted nature of task-based language teaching and learning, research in this area, especially ones that concern the role of interaction, warrants a holistic approach towards its analysis. It is an inherent truth that life in the classroom is not confined to only one dimension; in fact it is a buzzing hub of cognitive, pedagogical, and social activities. Most research so far treats tasks, and task-based interaction as an exclusive interpretation based on the research approach taken. As cautioned by a number of researchers, task-based research needs to be more holistic in its interpretation and it is best to consider the representation of multiple perspectives (Pica, 1997; Seedhouse, 1999; Skehan 2003; Ellis, 2009; Foster, 2009). This is even more required in the study of task-based interaction as it involves the participants

playing their multiple roles as a normal person, a learner and a task participant. All of the factors associated with classroom in general and the participants in particular will inevitably influence their task performance. Some research has begun to show a promising direction towards this kind of inquiry but the wealth of literature is still lacking.

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

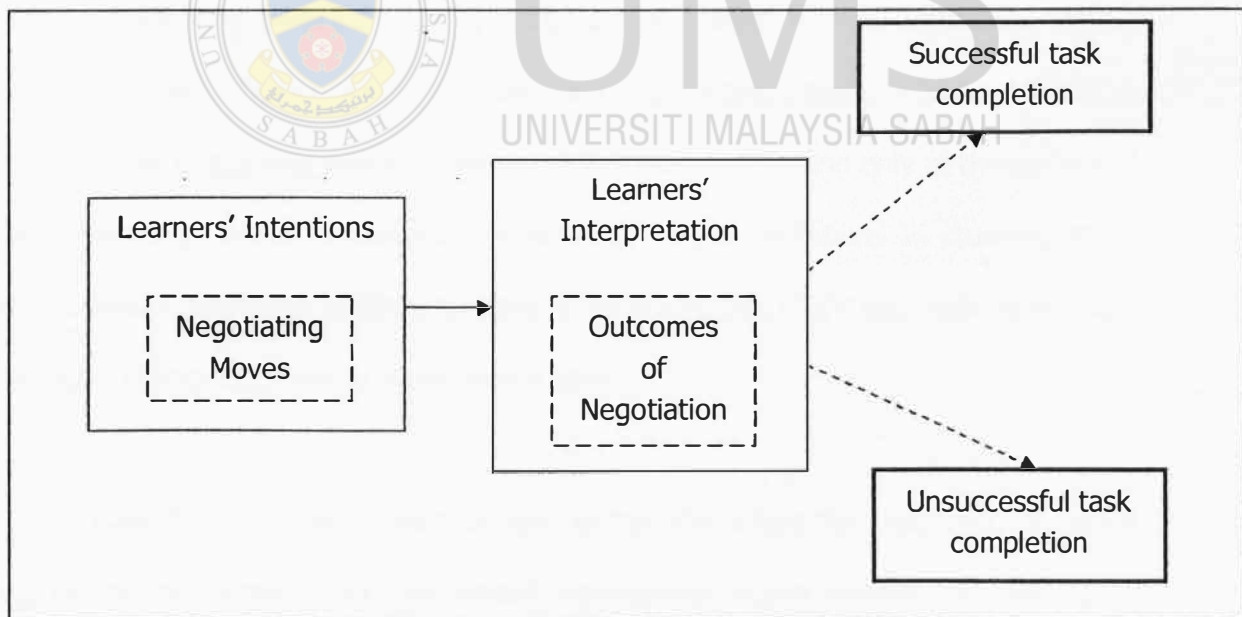
One of the most ambiguous natures of second language learning is the study on how interaction can actually maximize learners' language development. Tasks are often used as a means of collecting interaction data to be analysed further for the purpose of the particular study. Language learning, especially one that is done through interaction, is very subjective in interpretation. This is because interaction involves more than the tasks and what learners are expected to do with the tasks. There are a lot of other influencing factors that may not be observable and can only be revealed through the learners' perspectives.

The structure of interaction that exists when learners are working collaboratively towards achieving the task goal is a puzzle that has been attempted by many but achieved successfully by none. Learners, I believe, are the 'kings' in their own ways. Even if a task manipulates learners to optimize their language production, language quality, test new linguistic forms and what not, still, it is very hard to pinpoint any striking commonalities in learners' interaction. Negotiation of meaning, which some consider a communication strategy has been continuously studied for its purported value in addressing both communicative and linguistic needs of the learners. Nevertheless, in

Malaysian context, learners are not explicitly taught on how to negotiate meaning in interaction. Thus, most learners are not able to clearly express their intentions through the linguistic forms that they use.

This study focuses on how negotiation of meaning leads to successful task completion which requires learners to resolve communication breakdown and misunderstanding and also to achieve mutual decision. Due to this, the findings from the study might be able to shed light on how dependent is task completion on negotiation of meaning; and most importantly, what do learners really want to convey when they engage in negotiation of meaning.

#### 1.4 Conceptual Framework



*Figure 1.1: The study's conceptual framework*

The conceptual framework above served as a guide in my process of describing the interactional characteristics of the data. Because the interaction was recorded, it was

possible to determine signs of incomprehensibility and misunderstanding. These signs are referred to as negotiating moves and carry negotiating functions. The categories of negotiating moves were based on Long's Interaction Hypothesis. As learners attempt to complete the task, interaction among them occurs; and their attention during the interaction may be directed to something new, such as a new lexical item or grammatical construction, which promotes the development of the L2 (Gass & Mackey, 2007). The negotiating moves are expected to drive the participants to react. This reaction is considered as the outcome of the negotiating moves. This will eventually lead to the completion of the task. As shown in the conceptual framework, I placed great importance on learners' intention and interpretation since this has been shown to heavily influence interaction. This is due to the fact that research on interaction patterns almost always bore differential results depending on the socio-contextual factor of the research/classroom settings (Storch, 2002, Zhang, 2004, & Fujii & Mackey, 2009). Learners' intention for employing the particular negotiating moves can be interpreted as the functions of the negotiating moves as well. Instead of looking only at the surface of the negotiating moves, I believe incorporating learner intentions in studying these moves would enable me to discover possible functions that might not have been visible through the linguistic form of these moves alone.

Therefore, this study was framed within the interaction approach in which negotiation of meaning and its related interactional characteristics are claimed to facilitate SLA, and was carried out in the context of an ESL classroom.

## **1.5 Aim of the Study**

The purpose of this case study is to explore the way(s) in which learners negotiate meaning and how this negotiation leads to successful completion of tasks. This is not an intervention study, and thus linguistic performance is not the focus of the study.

## **1.6 Objective of the Study**

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- 1) To investigate the types of negotiating moves that learners make in negotiation of meaning episodes in task-based interaction
- 2) To probe into the learners' intentions in employing specific negotiating moves
- 3) To explore the process of meaning negotiation that leads to successful task completion

## **1.7 Research Questions**

This study is guided by two research questions:

- 1) How do learners negotiate for meaning in task-based interaction?
- 2) How does NfM help learners in completing the task?

## **1.8 Significance of the Study**

Before I begin to 'justify' my study, it is best to remember that I do not wish to dispute or agree with research in SLA, but rather to explore the 'hows' and 'whys' of task-based interaction within the parameters of NfM in interlanguage talk. Although this area has been and is still widely researched, the endless new findings and insights trigger my interest to explore NfM in task-based interaction as perceived from my context of study.

Nevertheless, most of the research I discovered was conducted in an ESL setting; where there is an opportunity to interact with the native speakers. In addition, most of the participants in these research either do not share the same L1, or where there are some participants who share an L1 and those who do not in the same context, with the exception of only a few studies (eg. Swain & Lapkin, 2000; McDonough, 2004; Alley, 2005; Carless, 2008; Tulung, 2008). Common sense will straight away tell us that learners in the contexts mentioned are 'forced' to use the target language. Furthermore, the examples of studies done with learners sharing similar L1 did not specifically elaborate on the occurrence of NfM, but are more concerned with the product of tasks, or task performance.

Compared to my study, the focus is on the *process* of completing the task. Therefore, it is highly likely that the insights provided by the participants in my study will slightly be different from the contexts mentioned above. The difference in context, in my opinion, plays a significant role in informing the course of a classroom interaction as interaction is very much a social process rather than sole pedagogical activity removed from the conventions of normal discourse. This present study, therefore, is significant in the possibilities of providing new insights into the area of NfM.

### **1.9 Limitation of the Study**

As I am only a novice researcher, there are limitations to this study in many aspects including methodological, contextual and pedagogical relevance.

Methodological limitations may relate to my bias in interpreting the data gathered. As I relied mostly on my inference of the interview data, there might be some personal bias that I was unable to detect. Nevertheless, preventive measures were taken including checking my interpretation with that of the participants during the final interview session.

This case study was very concentrated on one context and this context may not be the global feature of every classroom. Thus, findings from this study should be treated with caution if pedagogical implications in other contexts are to be considered.

As my aim was not to test hypothesis nor did I wish to prove beyond reasonable doubts that negotiation is the sure-fire way of tackling issues such as lack of speaking skills, the study may lose its appeal in the pragmatic view of pedagogy.

### **1.10 Definition of Key Terms**

For this study, the following terms are defined:

1. Negotiation of Meaning (NfM): Negotiation of meaning in this study is defined as the interactional work that takes place between two or more research participants in order to avoid or resolve communication breakdown and misunderstanding and to achieve mutual decision for the purpose of successful task completion. Negotiation of meaning will be referred to as NfM throughout the remainder of this report.

2. Task-based interaction: Task based interaction is defined as the verbal exchanges aiming at the completion of task between the research participants during the execution of a given task.

3. Non-native ESL learners: Non-native ESL learners is defined as the four research participants whose native language is not English.

### **1.11 Summary**

This chapter has provided the background for the study. Negotiation of meaning was discussed in relation to the importance of interaction in second language acquisition. This chapter has also discussed the research questions that governed this study. The significance of the study and its limitations were also described.



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