

INDONESIAN EFL TEACHERS' NEGOTIATION OF MEANING STRATEGIES IN TEACHING VOCABULARY

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Abstract

This article explores how Indonesian EFL teachers use negotiations of meaning in teaching vocabulary. Specifically, it reveals the negotiation of meaning strategies used by the teachers in leading the students to acquire new words in the EFL classroom. It goes over the findings of a single case study conducted at a state junior high school in the district of Bone, South Sulawesi. The data leading to the findings were obtained through classroom observation. The findings disclose that the teachers employ four negotiation of meaning strategies; repetition, elaboration, simplification and comprehension check questioning. It is so obvious that the teachers' use of the four negotiation of meaning strategies is an absolute consequence of teaching vocabulary through meaningful interactions with the students.

Key Words; *Negotiation of Meaning Strategies, Vocabulary, EFL Teachers*

Introduction

Vocabulary is the “flesh” of language. Without sufficient vocabulary, one's language will be “skinny”. This element of language is so essential since it greatly determines one's ability to communicate his ideas in a language; the more words he knows, the more information he can share and comprehend (Schmitt, 2000). In other words, lack of vocabulary results in lack of meaningful communication. For this reason, vocabulary acquisition has always become very important agenda in language learning.

Learning a language means undergoing the process of acquiring the language, and such an acquisition can happen effectively only through meaningful interaction in the target language (Krashen, 2001). Definitely, this widely-accepted notion is also valid in the context of vocabulary learning. In fact, a meaningful interaction provides learners with the opportunity to practically learn how all the elements of language, including vocabulary, are united to produce meanings.

Like other sorts of social interaction, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom interaction is vulnerable to misinterpretation (Stevens, 2011). It is so possible that the teacher's utterances confuse or are misinterpreted by the students. The communicative problem may be due to the teacher's language, which is still too complicated for the students to understand. Whenever this happens, negotiation of meaning can be used as the solution. As a process that speakers go through to reach a clear understanding of each other, negotiation of meaning is needed to avoid misunderstanding between the teacher and students (Foster, 1998; Storch, 2002). Ideally, what the students catch from what the teacher says is exactly what the teacher means by it. When, for instance, knowing that the students do not understand what he means by "*frankly.....*", the teacher can do some negotiation of meaning by providing a synonym of the adverb such as "*honestly.....*", which the students are more familiar with. From here, we can see that teacher's use of negotiation of meaning in vocabulary teaching and learning process has at least two benefits; firstly, it can facilitate the classroom interaction, and secondly, it can guide the students through the acquisition of new words. This is how teacher's negotiations of meaning in teaching vocabulary have their own characteristics.

Related Literature

1. Negotiation of Meaning

Negotiation is communication, but it goes much deeper than the fluent, unbroken sequences of message exchange which characterize the usual concept of communication (Pica, 1994). When interlocutors negotiate for meaning, they engage in any or all of the following activities; 1) they anticipate possible communication breakdowns, as they ask clarification questions and check each other's comprehension, 2) they identify communication breakdowns for each other, and 3) they repair them through signals and reformulations. Thus, it can be seen that what is called negotiation of meaning is basically constructed of four components; trigger, signal, response and follow up.

A trigger is the utterance which stimulates or evokes incomplete understanding on the part of the listener. "*Give me a hand*", which is said by a

native speaker of English to an Indonesian EFL learner, for instance, can trigger a negotiation of meaning since it can lead to the learner's confusion or misunderstanding. The listener's reaction, which indicates his confusion or misunderstanding, is a signal that it takes a negotiation of meaning to maintain the conversation; the signal can be expressed through either confirmation check or clarification request. Subsequently, the speaker shows his response to the signal, and it can be self-repetition, other-repetition response, self-modification or negate response. Afterwards, what occurs as the last component is follow-up, which is typically information about whether the communication modifications have been successful or not. Nonetheless, it is important to note that a negotiation of meaning can be much longer than the above-elucidated process, particularly when the interlocutors have to repeat the signal-response exchange until an agreement is achieved.

1.1. Negotiation of Meaning as a Construct in Language Learning

Negotiation of meaning triggers beneficial changes and results in a more effective language learning experience (Hartono & Ihsan, 2017). This is, as mentioned by Krashen (2001), because the negotiation connects input, internal learner capacities and output in productive ways. In this context, such a negotiation serves as the process in which learners and a competent speaker provide and interpret signals of their own and their interlocutor's perceived comprehension, thus provoking adjustments to linguistic form, conversational structure and message content (Long, 1996).

Negotiation of meaning can be used as a vehicle for language proficiency; it can enhance learners' fluency in a language classroom. Believing this, Long (1996) has introduced two types of task that encourage learners to perform negotiation of meaning in the classroom; one-way task and two-way task. In one-way task, only one learner holds all the information. Meanwhile, in two-way task, all have equal but partially shared information which the learners must exchange to get all the information. It seems that one-way task creates more opportunity for negotiation of meaning, and two-way task creates more strategies for meaning negotiation.

Finally, it can be deduced that in a foreign language classroom, negotiation of meaning is essentially interaction between teacher and learners or among learners who make adjustments to their speech and use of other techniques to repair a breakdown in communication. An example of how negotiation of meaning occurs in EFL learning setting can be seen in the following conversation between a teacher and student.

T : "It is a rectangular bench."

S : "Rectangular?"

T : "You know a rectangle has a um two long sides and two short sides".

S : “Uh...rectangle is a square.”

T : “You’ve got it.”

As we have seen, the student is not able to understand what the teacher says because of vocabulary problem; the student is troubled by the teacher’s use of *rectangular* in his utterance. The student then signals the problem by uttering “*rectangular?*”, and the teacher shows his response to the signal by providing some explanation about the word.

1.2. Negotiation of Meaning Strategies

Negotiations of meaning are performed through some strategies. Request for message clarification, confirmation, repetition, elaboration and simplification are the commonest negotiation of meaning strategies applied in conversations (Foster, 1998 : Pica, 1994 : Long, 1996).

A request for message clarification is done as a response to a speaker’s unclear utterance. Simply, employing this strategy means asking the speaker to clarify what he has said. When, for instance, an EFL student does not understand what the teacher means by “*give me a hand*”, the student may request the teacher to give some clarification by saying “*sorry?*” or “*what do you mean?*”.

Negotiating a meaning through confirmation means ensuring that what the speaker says is not misunderstood by the listener. When, for example, the teacher utters “*be punctual*”, the student may say “*you mean on time?*” as a confirmation.

A repetition is an act of repeating a word, phrase or sentence at one occasion in a conversation. It can be done on either the speaker’s own initiative or the listener’s request. In many cases, a speaker uses this strategy to highlight the important part of his statement in order for the listener to deeply understand his point. When, for instance, the teacher tries to boost the students’ learning motivation, he may say “*nowadays, without good English, you’ll all be nobody, nobody*”.

Doing an elaboration means helping the listener understand an utterance by providing some additional information about it. This strategy seems so common in EFL classroom. When, for example, the students are troubled by *exhausted*, the teacher can elaborate on it by saying “*you usually feel exhausted after working so hard*”.

Simplification deals with restating a statement in its simpler form. Typically, this strategy is applied as what the speaker says is too complicated for the listener to understand. When, for instance, the students do not understand what the teacher means by “*we would play the game were it a big classroom*”, the teacher may simplify the statement by saying “*the classroom is too small for the game*”.

2. Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary acquisition, which is the vocabulary learning target, involves three processes; noticing, retrieval, and creative (generative) process (Nation, 2001). The process of noticing involves detecting a given word and marking it as an unknown. A learner then reinforces the meaning of the word in his mind in the retrieval process. Afterwards, the generative process takes places as the learner learns to use the word in different ways.

Vocabularies can be taught and learnt in and out of context (Oxford &Scarella, 1994). Teaching and learning vocabulary in context means having a new word in a meaningful context in the class. Meanwhile, teaching and learning vocabulary out of context means merely having a new word together with its meaning in students' language; a teacher can do this by just providing the class with a list of new words. Despite the fact that both methods have some strengths and weaknesses, McCarty (1990) claims that words learnt through meaningful contexts are best assimilated and remembered. Maintaining this, Aitchison's (2003) proposes that vocabularies can be learnt intentionally and incidentally. Intentional vocabulary acquisition takes place when a learner straightforwardly memorizes new words with their respective translations from a list. Meanwhile, in incidental vocabulary learning, a learner encounters new words or terms with syntactic information, which helps him use the words accurately even in an idiomatic way. Conclusively, intentional vocabulary learning requires focal attention to be placed deliberately on the linguistic code, while incidental learning requires attention to be placed on meaning but allows peripheral attention to be directed at form.

Methodology

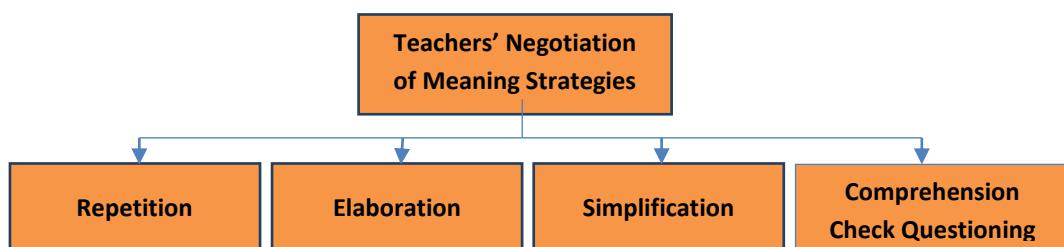
The research employed a single-case study design and was undertaken at a leading junior high school in the district of Bone, South Sulawesi. Two EFL teachers at the state school were purposively chosen as the subjects. The data leading to the findings were obtained through classroom observation.

Findings and Discussion

It was found that the subjects' use of negotiations of meaning in teaching vocabulary is mainly due to their teaching style. How the teachers lead the students to acquire new words in the EFL classroom seems in line with McCarty's (1990) concept that new words are best taught and learnt in meaningful contexts. Instead of directly informing the students the meanings of the new words in

bahasa Indonesia, the teachers tend to just insert the new words into the classroom conversations, implying that they want the students to figure out the meanings by considering the contexts. Whenever the students get troubled by a word, the teachers develop the conversation just to help them catch the meaning of the word. This is how the teachers' use of negotiation of meaning occurs in the vocabulary teaching and learning process. The figure below illustrates how the teachers typically negotiate a meaning in their vocabulary teaching in the EFL classroom.

Figure 4.1. Teachers' Negotiation of Meaning Strategies in Teaching Vocabulary



The teachers apply four negotiation of meaning strategies in teaching vocabulary in the EFL classroom; repetition, elaboration, simplification and comprehension check questioning. Their use of the four negotiation of meaning strategies occurs so naturally in the vocabulary teaching and learning process, providing the students with the opportunity to experience the natural process of acquiring new words.

- *Repetition*

The teachers apply repetition simply by repeating the words which they want the students to focus on in the classroom interactions.

Extract 1

T: Can you come to my home at 3 o'clock this afternoon? Please be **punctual!** **Punctual!**
Ss: What is punctual, Mam?

Extract 2

T: The policeman **chased** the robber. Do you know **chased**?
Ss: No, Mam.

When assuming that what they say contains a word which the students are not familiar with yet, the teachers typically repeat the word in a higher tone, and the repetition cues the students to highlight the word. The repetition of *punctual*, for instance, managed to lead the students to focus on the word. It is also important to note that the teachers can do such a repetition on either their own initiative or the students' request. As we have seen, in the case of *punctual*, the repetition occurred right after the students expressed their confusion, meanwhile, in that of *chased*, the repetition happened as the teacher assumed that it was still a

new word to the students. Apparently, the teacher's use of repetition as a negotiation of meaning strategy in teaching vocabulary has two purposes; to frame the words being taught and to make the students familiar with the words.

- *Elaboration*

The teachers' elaborations involve giving additional information about the messages which contain the words being taught or providing synonyms of the words.

Extract 3

Ss: What is punctual, Mam?

T: It means you come to my home not pass at 3, not pass 15 minutes. Have you known?

Extract 4

S: What is adorable mean, Mam?

T: Adorable is closest in meaning with very cute.

As we have seen, in the case of *punctual*, the elaboration occurred through explanation of the expression containing the word, meanwhile, in that of *adorable*, the elaboration took place through provision of a synonym of the word. From here, we can see that the teachers' elaborations do facilitate the students' efforts to figure out the meanings of the new words being learnt. It is so obvious that the teachers' negotiations of meaning through such elaborations can stimulate the students' critical thinking and lead them to acquire the new words naturally.

- *Simplification*

The teachers apply simplification as a negotiation of meaning strategy whenever they find that what they say is structurally too complicated for the students to understand.

Extract 5

T: Next week, Widi will go to Trans Studio next week if she has enough money.

S: Oh, I am so happy, Widi will join with us.

T: It means Widi doesn't have enough money yet.

Extract 6

T: Now tell me uh are you troubled by the words in the list?

Ss: (Silent)

T: Umm do you understand the words in the list?

The teachers typically employ simplification by providing a simpler version of their utterance. The two cases displayed above imply that the teachers streamline their troublesome expressions through either structural or lexical simplification. While structural simplification deals with restructuring an expression, lexical simplification involves restating an expression using more familiar words.

- *Comprehension Check Questioning*

The teachers use comprehension check questioning as a strategy to ensure whether or not the students are troubled by the words that they use in the teaching and learning process.

Extract 7

T: Fajrin, if you want to go to Bali next week, you need a tourist guide to accompany you to around Denpasar. **Do you know the meaning of guide?**

Ss: No, Mam.

Extract 8

S: Oh yes, I know the meaning upset.

T: **What do you catch about it?**

Teaching vocabulary through meaningful interaction with the students seems to have been the teachers' style in the EFL classroom. Instead of telling the students meanings of new words in bahasa Indonesia, the teachers tend to just use the words in real conversations with the students, and they apply comprehension check questioning just to confirm whether the students already know the words.

Conclusion and Suggestion

A second or foreign language can be acquired effectively through meaningful interactions in verbal communication in the target language, therefore, EFL learners are supposed to get used to practicing their English in real situations for significant progress in the learning process (Krashen, 2001). It is so obvious that the widely-accepted notion is also valid in the context of vocabulary learning. In fact, such a vocabulary learning process enables students to undergo the three processes proposed by Nation (2001); noticing, retrieval, and creative (generative).

Teaching vocabulary through meaningful interaction is not a piece of cake since the students are usually of low level of English. Definitely, it takes an effective strategy to build and maintain the classroom interaction, through which the new words acquisitions are expected to happen. This is how teacher's negotiations of meaning play a vital role in the vocabulary teaching and learning process in the EFL classroom. Simply, the teachers' use of the negotiation of meaning strategies is an absolute consequence of teaching vocabulary through meaningful interactions with the students.

Finally, the findings propose that EFL teachers are supposed to have sufficient negotiation of meaning knowledge and skill for effective vocabulary teaching in the classroom. In fact, having the knowledge and skill means having the ability to lead the students through the natural processes of acquiring new words.

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