Negotiation of Meaning in Multimodal Tandem Learning via Desktop Videoconferencing

Yuping Wang, School of Languages and Linguistics, Griffith University, Nathan, Australia
Jianqiu Tian, Department of English, Peking University, Beijing, PR China

ABSTRACT
Using the discourse model for negotiation of meaning developed by Varonis and Gass (1985), this study investigates the quality of the negotiation of meaning by eTandem partners in a videoconferencing-supported multimodal environment, and the facilitating effects of such an environment on L2 acquisition. To achieve this, three case studies were chosen from the interaction between 15 pairs of Mandarin and English students, to represent three levels of Mandarin proficiency of the dyads, namely, the low, intermediate and high levels. Data were examined and corroborated both qualitatively and quantitatively to reveal the interaction patterns of the dyads and the extent to which the multimodality of the videoconferencing environment contributes to learning. Recommendations are also drawn from this research.

Keywords: Computer Mediated Communication, Discourse Model, eTandem, Multimodal Interaction, Negotiation of Meaning, Skype

INTRODUCTION
This research is set against the established second language acquisition (SLA) tenet that interaction facilitates second language (L2) learners’ communicative competence. Yet, to find a sustainable way for interaction outside the classroom and in culturally and linguistically authentic contexts is still a pressing need faced by foreign language learners and professionals. In recent years, the qualities of eTandem have been analysed through many studies to determine its efficacy in L2 learning and acquisition.

eTandem learning is generally defined as a partnership between pairs of language learners learning each other’s first language and improving intercultural understanding (Thorne, 2005; Cziko, 2004; Brammerts, 2003).

It is worth noting that eTandem interaction has mostly been confined to asynchronously or synchronously text-based collaborations, usually in the form of e-mail exchanges, Internet Relay Chat or MOO (e.g., Appel & Gilabert, 2002; Belz & Thorne, 2006; Chun, 2011; Darhower, 2008; Lee, 2004; O’Rourke, 2005; Stickler & Emke, 2011; Tudini, 2003). Few studies have explored the oral and visual dimensions of eTandem learning, which differ, in many
important ways, from text-based interaction. The study conducted by Tian and Wang (2010) is an exception. Their study investigates learner perspectives of videoconferencing-supported eTandem learning between Mandarin and English learners learning each other’s first language. Both groups of students confirmed the facilitating effect of eTandem learning on improving their linguistic and intercultural competence, as well as the potential of Skype as an effective tool for eTandem learning. The current study is a continuation of their study to further establish the potential of videoconferencing-supported tandem learning, but this time, by exploring the processes and multimodal contexts of eTandem learners’ interaction in such learning. In so doing, the study seeks to answer the following two research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the negotiation of meaning by eTandem partners in a videoconferencing-supported multimodal environment?
2. In what ways does the synchronous multimodal environment contribute to L2 acquisition?

This investigation is timely as multimodal eTandem interaction supported by videoconferencing tools is still under-explored in L2 learning, both theoretically and in practice. Such interaction deserves closer examination for at least two reasons. Pedagogically, it could have unique facilitative potential for language development as it represents the closest form of interaction to face-to-face interaction. Technologically, videoconferencing tools and supporting infrastructure (e.g. internet speed, tablet and mobile computing) have recently become much more developed and sophisticated than before and are now an increasingly important means of communication for the digital generation. This study thus aims to contribute to research in this area by examining the characteristics of the discourse produced by eTandem learners, and the impact of the videoconferencing environment on eTandem interaction. The discourse model developed by Varonis and Gass (1985) for analyzing negotiation of meaning was adopted for such an analysis.

THE THERETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THIS RESEARCH

The Varonis and Gass model

It has long been established in L2 research that interactional modifications that emerge in the conversations between native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) is the sine qua non of L2 acquisition (Long, 1983). Interactional modification devices such as requests, recasts, repetitions, confirmation and comprehension checks, among others, have been regarded as important mechanisms for enhancing comprehensive input and output (see Pica, 1994).

The current research will take a micro-analytical approach to examine occasions of interactional modification in videoconferencing-supported tandem learning using the discourse model developed by Varonis and Gass (1985). Wang (2006) developed Figure 1 to elaborate on the Varonis and Gass (1985) model.

As shown in Figure 1, essentially, this model regards breakdowns caused by non-understanding as vertical deviations from the horizontal movement of the conversation, consisting of two parts: the Trigger (T) and the Resolution. The model further suggests that when an occasion of interactional modification is triggered, a negotiation routine will ensue and normally a resolution is expected. A resolution is often composed of three primes:

- the Indicator (I) signaling a communication problem encountered in a conversation;
- the Response (R) to the indication of problem; and
- the Reactions to Response (RR).
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