

Not necessarily strewn with
potholes: the case for a smoother
path to L2 task-based
development.

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A language learner needs to be a partner in meaning-focussed interactions, as much as a consumer of form-focussed instruction.

(cf Hatch, Krashen, Long, and TBLT types in general.....)

Krashen: The Input Hypothesis

We acquire language in one way only,
through understanding messages.

(aka Comprehensible Input)

Long's Interaction Hypothesis

1983, 1996

- Understanding messages is not sufficient for acquisition, learners have to send them, too.
- Attention to language form is required.
- This is provided by negotiation of/for meaning at points of *not* understanding messages, or not having your message understood.

Negotiation of/for Meaning

“NoM, and especially negotiation work that triggers adjustments by the NS or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways.” p451

- Comprehensible input and output aids L2 development.
- NfM provides comprehensible input and output, and opportunities for ‘noticing’ forms in the L2.
- Ergo, NfM aids L2 development.

But what is NfM exactly?

‘**Communicative trouble**’ which ‘can lead learners to recognize that a **linguistic problem** exists, switch their attentional focus from message to form, identify the problem and notice the needed item in the input.’

(Long 1996:425)

.....'an activity that occurs when a listener signals to the speaker that the speaker's **message is not clear** and the speaker and the listener work linguistically to resolve this **impasse.**' Pica 1992

NfM happens

when 'communication is interrupted'

or

there is 'difficulty in message
comprehensibility'.

Pica 1994

NfM....

....occurs after a signal that there is a **linguistic problem** which needs explicit resolution. Ellis et al. 2001

NfM

....comprises ‘instances in conversation when participants need to **interrupt the flow** of the conversation in order for both parties to understand what the conversation is about.’

Gass and Selinker 1994

- . Similarly, Mackey et al. (2000: 476) situate NfM at points of 'communication breakdown' triggered by 'something incomprehensible [which] becomes the impetus for learners to recognize an inadequacy in their own rule system.'

More recently, NfM is

“...turns of talk in which speakers check their own and each others’ messages, particularly at points where there appears to be a **breakdown or misfire in communication.**”

Samuda and Bygate 2008:116

Thus, definitions of NfM

- Invariably situate moments of insight into the L2 form as arising from resolving **problems in understanding L2 message**.
- Such moments provide a focus of form, '*noticing*', leading to comprehensible input, just when and where it is most valuable.

The flip side of NfM

When interaction proceeds smoothly, the interlocutors regard each others' language as unremarkable and hence nothing in it is there to be '*noticed*'.

- A lot of empirical work in the 80s,90s and 00s was devoted to finding which tasks maximised opportunities for NfM, on the assumption this created a fertile environment for second language development in interaction.
- A further assumption was that learners do not necessarily notice L2 forms in input which they have understood.

Problems with NfM

- No empirical connection to L2 development.
- Little evidence that morphosyntax provokes negotiation sequences.
- Operationalisations a bit slippery/ambiguous.
- Does not take account of the social aspects of interaction or the social identities of task participants.

- Somehow or other in the research literature, the term *negotiation* moved away from overcoming a communication **problem/impasse/breakdown** caused by **lack of understanding of the code**, to one caused by **lack of information about the content**.
- The definitions of NfM, however, remain unaltered in current literature.

Mackey (1999:584 footnote) explicitly equates the terms ‘negotiated interaction’, ‘conversational interaction’ and ‘negotiation’ because:

“They have often been used throughout the literature to refer to the same concept.”

This is true, but it does mean the Interaction Hypothesis needs a bit of work to make it fit not FoF at **opportune moments of communication breakdown**, but **FoF in interaction in general**.

Does NfM support language learning?

Mackey 1999 addresses the lack of empirical connection between NfM and L2 development by posing this question:

“Does conversational interaction facilitate Second Language Development?”

- NfM is operationalised as **asking content questions**.
- L2 development is measured by development of ‘question forms’
- Results show that **asking and answering questions** supports development of **question form syntax**.
- Cannot address the link between troubleshooting L2 code problems and L2 development because it does not investigate it.

- Similarly, Gass, Mackey and Ross-Feldman (2005) set out to show that NfM is as likely to happen in a lab setting as a classroom.
- They conclude that setting does not affect incidence of NfM.

It is likely that the reason this study finds lots of NfM and Foster (1998) and Foster and Ohta (2005) do not, is that it is not counting NfM as defined, even by themselves.....

*Learners seeking clarification, confirmation and repetition of utterances **they do not understand** (p56)...*

NfM has slipped from

troubleshooting in the presence of
communication code problems

to

asking content questions in the absence of
communication code problems.

Fortunately,

this is does not really matter much.

Instances of true NfM in learner task-based interactions are predominantly lexical or phonological in origin.

And they are infrequent, especially when it comes to morphosyntax, where they are vanishingly rare.

My earlier point that NfM does not take account of the **social** aspects of interaction and the **social** identities of task participants is relevant here.

Humans interact linguistically by nature, from infancy. Our interactions are guided through expressions of **interest and encouragements** to continue. We do not naturally **interrogate** each other's syntax, and negotiate for meaning only when accent or vocabulary has obscured meaning beyond hope of comprehension (and not always then).

Humans are not language processing machines requiring total clarity of message.

We avoid threatening face, whether our own or our interlocutor's.

We pretend to understand even when we have not; 'a ritual of understanding.' Aston (1986)

In any interaction, we have a **social** identity that will affect how we perform it.

Fortunately,

- *Unnegotiated interaction, which is vastly more common, is resource of L2 information for an alert, co-operative and engaged learner.
- * i.e. without NfM *as defined as **troubleshooting communication failure**,*

Cognitively speaking...

If an L2 interaction is proceeding **smoothly and meaningfully** between two learners, or a learner and a teacher, there should be enough attentional space for the learner(s) to ‘notice’ all manner of things about the forms of the L2 employed by the interlocutor.....

- ‘Noticing’ (Schmidt 1990) can be intentional or inadvertent, can strike peripheral attention as well as focal attention, and can be sparked by any feature of the L2 that strikes the learner as useful, unusual or contrary to expectations.
- Learners who ‘notice’ most, learn most....

...Noticing such things in the interlocutor's speech as:

- “Great new word.”
- “Yes! I've heard that before, but never in this context.”
- “I like that idiom.”
- “She said that better than I would have managed.”
- “*Feminine* adjective?”
- “So *that's* how you pronounce it!”

And if the interaction falters, the interlocutor can provide help.....

- “She’s wrong, I’ll rephrase.”
- “She’s lost, I’ll help out.”

can discuss L2 form explicitly...

A: he has forget? have forget? is forget?

B: has forgot?

A: has forgotten.

and, sometimes, troubleshoot
through NfM.

- “ I don’t understand her, I must ask for help.”
- “I’ll just check that she understands me.”
- “I wonder if this is what she means?”

Tasks generate considerably more interaction,
and more valuable interaction, than do
NfMs over communication breakdowns.

- Tasks generate conversational interactions in which learners behave like the **social** beings they are, and in which they are exposed to all manner of positive and negative evidence about the L2.
- The shift from troubleshooting to conversing is welcome, but needs to be made explicit in the Interaction Hypothesis.

- Future research references to NfM should make clear whether they are following the published definitions, (i.e identifying moments of communication failure) or merely using the term ‘negotiation’ to stand in for ‘conversation’.