



Do children negotiate for meaning in task-based interaction? Evidence from CLIL and EFL settings



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ABSTRACT

Interaction research has demonstrated the facilitative role of negotiation of meaning in the process of L2 learning. Pioneering work by Oliver (2002) considered child interaction in an English as a second language (ESL) setting. However, little is known about child interaction in foreign language classrooms and much less about a new learning context that is becoming prevalent in Europe: Content-and-language-integrated-learning (CLIL). Although general discourse features have been investigated in this setting, it is still necessary to examine whether its special characteristics (more exposure to the target language and interactive methodology) have an effect on learners' production. This paper focuses on English as a foreign language (EFL) and CLIL children's oral interaction while completing a picture-placement task. Eighty (80) 8–11 year old children were paired to form 40 age- and proficiency-matched dyads (20 EFL, 20 CLIL) and their oral production was analyzed to identify the different strategies they use to complete the task. Findings point to quantitative differences between the two contexts and age groups. CLIL learners negotiate more and resort to the L1 less frequently than EFL learners. On the other hand, older children in both contexts negotiate less and use the L1 more frequently than younger children.

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1. Introduction

Numerous studies to date have recognized the positive role of learner interaction in the second language (L2) acquisition process (García Mayo & Alcón Soler, 2013; Mackey, 2007; Mackey, Abbuhl, & Gass, 2011; Pica, 2013, among many others). The Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) claims that incidental learning is facilitated through *negotiation of meaning* when interactions are modified among conversational partners to avoid breakdowns in communication. The overall finding of these studies is that interaction facilitates L2 learning because (i) it provides positive input sometimes uniquely modified to suit learners' needs (*comprehensible input*), (ii) learners produce comprehensible output, that is, they modify their own contributions to a conversation in order to make themselves understood (*modified output*), and (iii) learners may receive *corrective feedback* in numerous forms in response to their output.

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Most of this research has focused on English as a second language (ESL) adult populations (Mackey, 2007, 2012 for a review), with the exception of the pioneering work by Oliver (2002, 2009 *et passim*), who examined child interaction in ESL settings. This scarcity of research on child interaction is even more telling when one thinks of research in foreign language settings (Lázaro & Azpilicueta Martínez, 2015; Pinter, 2007; Van den Branden, 1997, 2000, 2008), something that is in contrast with the increasing number of foreign language programs for children all over the world and the introduction of foreign languages in school settings earlier in life (García Mayo & García Lecumberri, 2003; Cameron, 2003; Enever, 2011; Muñoz, 2006; Nikolov & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2006, 2011). In fact, as Muñoz (2014a) points out, in 2011 only 4 countries in Europe retained 10 or 11 as the age to start exposure to a foreign language whereas 23 countries mandated an earlier start age. Considering the concern in these settings about learners not achieving fluency in the foreign language after many years of exposure, research should focus on obtaining information about EFL learners in order to maximize their opportunities for learning (Pinter, 2011).

In fact, a new methodological approach, known as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is being extensively implemented in many European countries (Dalton-Puffer, 2007, 2011) in order to improve learning opportunities in foreign language contexts. In this approach learners have more hours of exposure to the target language and follow an interactive methodology where tasks play a central role. Tasks provide learners with the opportunity to use language with a purpose and have been widely used in second language acquisition (SLA) research to gather samples of learner language (García Mayo, 2007). Research on interaction in CLIL from a cognitive perspective (Long, 1996; Mackey, 2012) is very limited among adult populations (but see García Mayo & Basterrechea, *in press*; Basterrechea & García Mayo, 2013) and basically non-existent with children.

Thus, the present study aims to be a first step in documenting EFL children's negotiation strategies in two educational settings, namely mainstream EFL and CLIL, both of which remain under-explored from an interactionist perspective. Specifically, this paper documents the oral interaction of 80 Spanish EFL children of two age groups while completing a two-way communicative task (picture-placement). The children belonged to two different state schools in Pamplona (Northern Spain) following similar educational programs. In documenting the children's negotiation strategies, we take up the call made by Philp, Oliver, and Mackey (2008: 13) for "[...] rich detailed descriptions of the many and various factors which interact to impact a given child's L2 development". The participants in the study, 80 8–11 year-old children, were paired to form 40 age- and proficiency-matched dyads (20 EFL, 20 CLIL) and their oral production was video-recorded, transcribed and coded in order to analyze their conversational strategies.

2. Literature background

2.1. Negotiation of meaning in a second language (L2)

As mentioned above, research on conversational interaction during the past three decades has shown that the processes that occur when learner–learner and learner–native speaker (NS) engage in L2 learning (see Keck, Ibarra-Shea, Tracy-Ventura, & Wa-Mbaleka, 2006, and Mackey & Goo, 2007 for meta-analyses). Numerous studies have shown that incidental learning is facilitated through the negotiation of meaning, defined by Pica (1994: 494) as:

[...] the modification and restructuring of interaction that occurs when learners and their interlocutors anticipate, perceive or experience difficulties in message comprehensibility. As they negotiate, they work linguistically to achieve the needed comprehensibility, whether repeating a message verbatim, adjusting its syntax, changing its words, or modifying its form and meaning in a host of other ways.

Negotiation of meaning affords learners comprehensible input but it may also bring about changes in learner production (output), attention to problematic formal and meaning aspects on the basis of feedback provided and, most importantly, the engagement of the learners' cognitive mechanisms (attention) in processing form-meaning relationships.

Long (1983) operationalized the conversational adjustments that interlocutors use during negotiation of meaning as confirmation checks, clarification requests and comprehension checks. *Confirmation checks* are "any expressions [...] immediately following an utterance by the interlocutor which are designed to elicit confirmation that the utterance has been correctly heard or understood by the speaker." (Long, 1983: 137). One speaker seeks confirmation of the other's preceding utterance through repetition, with rising intonation, of what was perceived to be all or part of the preceding utterance (Pica, 1987). Consider the following example:

- | | | |
|-----|--|---|
| (1) | NS English:
Learner:
NS English.
Learner:
(Pica, 1987) | did you get high marks? Good grades?
high marks? ← confirmation check
good grades A's and B's – did you get A in English?
oh no in English yes em B |
|-----|--|---|

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