Meaning Negotiation of LEP Learners in Communicative Tasks

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore Limited English Language Proficiency (LEP) learners' meaning negotiation in communicative tasks. In particular, the frequency of meaning negotiation (MN), types and frequency of MN trigger as well as participants' perceptions of the communicative tasks in relation to their L2 language development were explored. A total number of 8 participants were engaged in both open and closed communicative tasks designed for the purpose of this study. Data from stimulated recall interviews and structured interviews were used to consolidate the primary data. It was found that the closed communicative task can yield greater meaning negotiation compared to open communicative task. Meaning negotiation in closed communicative task was mainly triggered by task complexity and lexical difficulties, which might be due to the task design. Meanwhile, meaning negotiation in the open communicative task was mainly caused by the delivery of vague message. It was found that meaning negotiation can be a potential platform to facilitate language development among learners, particularly through clarification requests which can create the linguistic urgency to push LEP learners to expand their interlanguage. Thus, ESL teachers might want to equip LEP learners with effective meaning negotiation strategies, particularly clarification requests, to better equip these learners with the skills to modify their language output during communicative tasks.

Keywords: Meaning negotiation; open communicative task; closed communicative task; MN trigger; LEP learners

INTRODUCTION

Meaning negotiation (MN) has been referred to in the literature by a variety of terms such as *negotiation for meaning* (Crossley, Salsbury & McNamara 2010, Foster & Ohta 2005, Gass, Mackey & Ross-Feldman 2011), *negotiation of meaning* (Bitchener 2004, Luciana 2005, Nakahama, Tyler & van Lier 2001, Yi & Sun 2013, Yufrizal 2001), *meaning negotiation* (Qiao 2010), *negotiated interaction* (Eckerth 2009), *conversational repair (*Liebscher & Dailey-o'cain 2003) and *repair negotiation* (Kitajima 2013). In general, the terms refer to attempts made by interactants to resolve comprehension difficulties in an interaction. In other words, 'the loss of meaning' (Gass & Selinker 1994 as cited in Foster & Ohta 2005) or communication failure is the departure point for any meaning negotiation cycle.

The role of MN as an important aspect of interaction within the context of second language acquisition (SLA) is well documented in the literature (Bitchener 2004, Crossley, Salsbury & McNamara 2010, Kuiken & Vedder 2002, Luciana 2005, Yi & Sun 2013, Yufrizal 2001). Thus, it is not surprising that many studies (Crossley, Salsbury & McNamara 2010, Foster & Ohta 2005, Gass, Mackey & Ross-Feldman 2011, Qiao 2010) have been conducted across different task types in investigating factors which affect MN patterns, so as to explore how MN can be used as a potential means for promoting second language acquisition (SLA).

However, most studies on MN have focused on exploring how intermediate language proficiency learners negotiate meaning during communicative tasks (Bitchener 2004, Eckerth 2009, Luciana 2005, Nakahama, Tyler & Van Lier 2001). In contrast, there is hardly any

study investigating the influence of MN on the L2 interlanguage development of low language proficiency (LEP) learners. This oversight needs to be addressed as it is this particular group of learners that deserve more attention. This is because limited language users tend to face difficulties in MN, thereby resulting in them not benefitting from MN activities. Furthermore, when it comes to English second language (ESL) classrooms, a lack of understanding of how task types affect MN among LEP learners might result in meaningless language activities due to its failure in achieving the desired learning outcomes. This is because although the MN tasks might be interesting to high proficiency learners, the tasks might not be productive for LEP learners.

Therefore, studies on MN and the effect of task types on MN warrant further exploration, especially when it involves low language proficiency learners, so as to enable them to benefit the most from the communicative tasks. In particular, this study will investigate the frequency of MN, the types and frequency of MN trigger as well as participants' perceptions on open and closed communicative tasks in relation to their language development so as to find out whether open or closed communicative tasks can provide more learning opportunities for LEP learners as far as SLA is concerned.

NEGOTIATION OF MEANING AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Meaning negotiation plays a vital role in learners' language development. This is further consolidated by evidence which suggests that meaning negotiation can promote modified output (Bitchener 2004) which in turn will prompt learners to focus on form (Luciana 2005) and notice their linguistic gaps (Kuiken & Vedder 2002), besides promoting comprehensible input (Uggen 2012), which is viewed as necessary for facilitating comprehension. The main contribution of meaning negotiation in facilitating SLA, lies in the opportunities made available for the learners to modify their language output (Bitchener 2004, Luciana 2001, McDonough 2005, Morris 2002, Yufrizal 2001).

The role of negotiation of meaning in prompting learners to modify their output is highlighted by Bitchener (2004), who carried out a longitudinal study to investigate the role of negotiation in SLA. It was argued that learners have the opportunities to obtain valuable interactional feedback for the modifications of their output during an interaction. Interestingly, a high retention rate for the negotiated items was also noted even after three months, suggesting that meaning negotiation is likely to promote SLA. Non-modified signals, such as clarification requests and echoing words from the previous utterance, were found to be effective in getting participants to modify their language output. Since non-modified signals do not provide the target language models, participants will be pushed to modify their language output in order to clarify any non-understanding in the interaction.

The role of clarification requests, as an effective interactional mechanism was again highlighted in McDonough's (2005) study, which was carried out to look into the impact of negative feedback, in the form of clarification requests on learners' output modifications. It was reported that clarifications requests can effectively push the learners towards modifying their output. A positive correlation was found between the use of clarification request and learners' output modifications, suggesting that clarifications requests can better prompt the learners to modify their language output during meaning negotiation.

Likewise, in comparing the use of recasts and negotiation moves such as confirmation checks, clarification requests, and repetitions, Morris (2002) also found that negotiation moves were more effective in getting the learners to do both the lexical repairs and syntactic repairs in the jigsaw task. Recasts, which are the reformulations of the learners' non target-like forms, were ineffective in directing the learners to notice their errors, hence reducing the frequency of learner repairs in the interaction.

The role of meaning negotiation can be further explained with Luciana's (2005) finding that meaning negotiation can effectively lead the learners to focus on form. In the study which was carried out to explore meaning negotiation in picture comparison and picture drawing tasks, Luciana (2005) found that direct indicators, such as clarification requests and corrections, were more effective than indirect indicators, such as echoing words from previous utterance, in pushing the learners to focus on form during both communicative tasks.

When learners' attention is directed to focus on form during meaning negotiation (Luciana, 2005), they will be prompted to notice their linguistic problems as attention is a prerequisite to gap noticing. Kuiken and Vedder (2002) observed that meaning negotiation can lead the learners to notice their linguistic problems on passive forms during the discussion in two dictogloss tasks. In fact, two types of noticing, namely, simple and elaborate noticing were noted. Simple noticing takes place when a passive form was mentioned, but not put into discussion. As for elaborate noticing, the learners actually proposed the passive form, discussed and later decided whether to make the necessary reformulation.

Apart from that, output modification also has positive effects on learners' subsequent input processing (Uggen 2012). When one is pushed towards producing comprehensible output, the other conversational partner will get the comprehensible input at the same time. 'Confirmation checks', 'clarification requests' and 'reformulations of others' speech' are interactional adjustments which are normally related to the negotiation of input (Choi 2003). Therefore, in negotiating meaning through communicative tasks, learners are generally pushed towards generating both comprehensible output and input, which are essential in facilitating their SLA. This is addressed in Long's (1985) Interaction Hypothesis.

From the arguments above, it can be concluded that output modifications through meaning negotiation (Bitchener 2004, Luciana 2001, Yufrizal 2001) can facilitate SLA in view of the opportunities made available for the learners to focus on form (Luciana 2005) and accordingly notice their linguistic gaps (Kuiken & Vedder 2002) besides enabling other interlocutors to obtain comprehensible input (Uggen 2012), which are all viewed as necessary for facilitating SLA.

The arguments above are further consolidated by empirical studies (Crossley, Salsbury & McNamara 2010, Yi & Sun 2013) which have been carried out to examine the effects of meaning negotiation. It was found that meaning negotiation can provide the contexts necessary for learners to acquire vocabulary (Yi & Sun 2013) as well as to produce more cohesive language output (Crossley, Salsbury & McNamara 2010). Therefore, in negotiating meaning through communicative tasks, learners are generally pushed towards generating both comprehensible output and input which in turn will facilitate their SLA.

OPEN AND CLOSED COMMUNICATIVE TASKS

A task can be defined along the two dimensions of task features, namely interactional activity and communication goal (Pica, Kanagy & Falodin 1993). Interactional activity is determined by interactant relationship and interaction requirement while communication goal consists of goal orientation and outcome options. Therefore, communicative tasks can be categorized into different types, depending on their interactive conditions.

By definition (Long 1989), the fundamental difference between a closed task and an open task lies in its expected task outcome. An open task refers to a communicative task whose outcome is not predetermined or rather open-ended (Long 1989). In an open task, there is no single predetermined solution as a number of solutions or outcomes are possible, depending on the discussion. A closed task refers to a communicative task which requires

very restricted information to be exchanged for the task completion (Long 1989). In a closed task, there exists a single correct solution which is predetermined by the task designer.

Both tasks differ in terms of its interactant relationship and interaction requirement as well (Pica, Kanagy & Falodin 1993). In closed communicative task, both participants have access to a different portion of the information needed for task completion. Meaning negotiation will take place when participants are engaged in the relationship of mutual request and suppliance of information. As for open communicative task, participants have a shared access to the information needed for task completion. Although the information is expected to flow in two-way as in closed communicative task, there is a possibility that the task can be completed without such exchange (ibid).

Different task types, due to the nature of the tasks (open/closed) will stimulate distinctive interactional patterns (Nunan 1991). However, a review on the literature reveals that closed tasks are superior than open tasks in that they can promote more meaning negotiation (Gass, Mackey & Ross-Feldman 2011, Nunan 1991) and better language performance in terms of fluency (Rahimpour 2007, 2008, 2010) and accuracy (Rahimpour 2010).

Although a great deal of the studies (Gass, Mackey & Ross-Feldman 2011, Nunan 1991, Rahimpour 2007, 2008, 2010) has led to the conclusion that closed tasks are more productive in terms of the opportunities provided for learners to negotiate meaning, most of these studies were conducted among learners of intermediate language proficiency (Nunan 1991, Rahimpour 2007, 2008, 2010). However, it does not mean that the negotiation of meaning in open and closed tasks among LEP learners can simply be assumed, thus calling for more empirical work on this topic.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed method research design was adopted for the purpose of this study because integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches can ensure a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem compared to either quantitative or qualitative approach alone (Croninger & Valli 2009, Kuiken & Vedder 2002). As shown in Foster and Ohta's (2005) study, multiple methods can best capture the complexities of learners' discourse as the context of the discourse is of crucial importance for the interpretation of the data.

PARTICIPANTS

The sample for this study consists of eight Malay ESL learners who are aged between 22 and 25. Two selection criteria were employed for the purpose of this study, which are the homogeneity in their first language (L1) background and a composite band score in criterion-referenced Malaysian University English Test (MUET). The profile of the participants is shown in *Table 1.* As this study intends to explore meaning negotiation among LEP learners, only learners who scored Band 1 or 2 were selected to take part in this study. According to the MUET descriptors (Malaysian Examinations Council 2006), Band 1 and 2 candidates are categorized as very limited and limited language users respectively, referring specifically to those who have limited language ability to function adequately in communication.

TABLE 1. Profile of participants

Group	Participants	Age	MUET Results
Pair 1 (P1)	R1	25	Band 2
	R2	24	Band 1
Pair 2 (P2)	R3	24	Band 1

	R4	23	Band 1
Pair 3 (P3)	R5	23	Band 1
	R6	22	Band 1
Pair 4 (P4)	R7	23	Band 2
	R8	23	Band 1

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Two types of data were collected for the purpose of this study. The primary data consisted of solicited data, which was collected by the researcher using a stimuli, through open and closed communicative tasks. Data collection designed as such has the advantage of allowing the researcher to optimally obtain the intended data to address a particular research question (Hox & Boieje 2005). A picture-based comparison task (see *Appendix A*) was used as the closed communicative task, while *'The Desert Island'* (see *Appendix B*) which requires the participants to reach a mutually acceptable decision following their discussion was employed as the open communicative task.

Eight sessions of conversational interactions, which in total amounted to approximately 90 minutes of interlanguage data, were transcribed for data analysis, using conversational analysis transcription convention developed by Sacks, Scheglofi and Jefferson (1974). Initially, the transcribed data were analyzed for meaning negotiation sequences based on Gass and Varonis' (1985) model of meaning negotiation and the types of trigger that initiated meaning negotiation.

Table 2 illustrates how meaning negotiation instances were identified, with a typical meaning negotiation cycle extracted from the data used as an example. A non-understanding signal was first extended by R8 when she asked '*Did you mean the mail box?*' as a confirmation check for the utterance *'maybe this is for er post?'* which was used by R7. Therefore, R8's indicator of the incomplete comprehension was coded as *Indicator (I)* while R7's utterance which has resulted in R8's lack of understanding, was coded as *Trigger (T)*. As a response to R8's confirmation check, R7 acknowledged that R8 has provided her the intended utterance. R8's utterance was thus coded as *Speaker's Response (R)*. Grasping R7's intended meaning, R8 reacted by showing her understanding, to which the utterance used was coded as *Reaction to the Response (RR)*.

TABLE 2. A typical meaning negotiation cycle

Participant	Utterance	Extract	Meaning Negotiation Sequences
R7	20	Ah, at the Newsagent Shop, I can see one erm what to say po... er maybe this is for er post?	*T- Trigger of meaning negotiation*
R8	21	Did you mean the mail box?	*I – Confirmation check*
R7	22	Yes, yes	*R – Acknowledgement*
R8	23	Yes, I see the mail box, er in front the Newsagent.	*RR – Showing understanding*

Once the meaning negotiation instances have been identified and coded, all the triggers identified were then classified according to their categories, namely, lexical, phonetic, content and task complexity. This is because an understanding of the factor which triggers the meaning negotiation sequences will reveal why the participants need to negotiate meaning when they are engaged in the tasks, hence this information will be useful for explaining the phenomenon of meaning negotiation.

As the participants were aware that they are participating in a research study, their actual performance might be affected. Therefore, data triangulation was needed for an adequate interpretation of the data. In this study, interview data gathered from stimulated

recall interviews and structured interview served as triangulated data to consolidate the primary data.

Stimulated recall interviews were administered to the participants immediately after each task. This is because the rationale behind a stimulated recall interview is to prompt the participants to recall thoughts at that moment when they were carrying out a task, therefore the gap between task completion and a stimulated recall interview was kept as short as possible. It is thus considered best to be carried out immediately after a recently completed task. When the activity is still fresh in the participants' memory, a direct report of the experience is thus possible (Gass & Mackey 2000). According to Gass and Mackey (2000), analysis of data gathered from stimulated recall interview involves transcription, coding and description of data. Therefore, all the recorded data from stimulated recall interviews were first transcribed and coded for explanation related to meaning negotiation sequences.

To explain how participants perceived open and closed communicative tasks in relation to their language development, data gathered from the structured interviews were organized based on the salient themes emerging from the interview transcripts. In particular, participants' perceptions of the level of difficulty of the communicative tasks, the problems that they faced during the tasks and factors affecting their language development were explored.

RESULTS

FREQUENCY OF MEANING NEGOTIATION

In order to compare the amount of meaning negotiation in open and closed communicative tasks, meaning negotiation in both communicative tasks was examined with reference to the number of meaning negotiation cycles identified and the results are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3. The frequency of meaning negotiation in open and closed communicative tasks

Communicative Tasks	P1	P2	P3	P4	Total
Open	3	1	4	6	14*
Closed	2	5	11	28	46*

P1= Pair 1, P2= Pair 2, P3= Pair 3, P4= Pair 4

A higher index of meaning negotiation cycles indicates a higher amount of meaning negotiation during a particular communicative task. As a comparison, closed communicative task was found to trigger more meaning negotiation than open communicative task (Refer *Table 3*). This is because 46 meaning negotiation cycles were identified in closed communicative task while only 14 meaning negotiation cycles observed in open communicative task.

TYPES OF TRIGGER

Four types of trigger, namely, lexical, phonetic (Nakahama, Tyler & van Lier 2001), content and task complexity (Abdurrahman 2007) were coded in this study. The analysis is illustrated through the extracts in Table 4. The label ***Source OP: P4: U11-14*** indicates that the extract was contributed by Pair 4 (*Utterance 11-14*) when they were engaged in open communicative tasks. Data from the stimulated recall interview (SRI) have been included to give a clearer picture of what was happening during the communicative tasks.

TABLE 4. Lexical trigger and meaning negotiation sequences

Trigger type	Participant	Utterance	Extract 1	Meaning Negotiation Sequences
1. Lexical	*Source OP: P4: U11-14*			
	R8	11	**Because cloth can ... er attack us to dangerous, cool**	T
	R7	12	Do you mean protect?	I
		13	Yes, protect	
	R8	14	Sorry, er to protect our cool and insert (mispronounced) to bite our body	R
	SRI		*R7: Because she said that, with the cloth can attack our body, 'attack' is not suitable for the cloth, I think she want to say 'protect' because the pronounce is almost same, maybe. [sic]* *R8: Yes, I want to say 'protect' but in my thinking, just said 'attack'[sic]*	

In Table 4, Extract 1, R8 corrected her own utterance using the target-like form 'protect' provided by R7 after a non-understanding signal (trigger) was extended by R7 due to her use of the wrong word choice, 'attack'. R7 expressed her difficulties in understanding the message by requesting for clarification. As a result, R8 modified her language output in her attempt to clarify the confusion.

TABLE 5. Phonetic trigger and meaning negotiation sequences

Trigger type	Participant	Utterance	Extract 2	Meaning Negotiation Sequences
2. Phonetic	*Source OP: P3:U53-55*			
	R5	53	**We don't know er how long we stay at er Iceland** ('island' was mispronounced)	T
	R6	54	The deserted island?	I
	R5	55	Erm, the er	R
	R6		Oh, okay er	RR

In Table 5, Extract 2, a non-understanding of the message was triggered through the confirmation check made by R6 as she uttered '*The deserted island*?' as a response to R5's mispronunciation of the word '*island*'. As a response, R5 just replied with a filler 'erm' as an acknowledgement that she has captured the non-understanding signals without any modification of her output.

TABLE 6. Content trigger and meaning negotiation sequences

Trigger type	Participant	Utterance	Extract 3	Meaning Negotiation Sequences
3. Content	*Source OP: P1: U26-28*			
	R2	26	**er if the boat is have a leaking er at the same time, canned food can be a help when the station is very very dangerous**	T
	R1	27	Can you explain more why er (clear throat) how the can is er can help you when your boat is leaking?	I
	R2	28	Okay, the boat is leaking, okay the boat is leaking, so the can can be er the futil (mispronounced) at the ah left and right the boat	R

	SRI	*R1: I thinking how the cans can help to balance the boat, so that's why I asked to … [sic]* *R2: Saya nak cakap 'terapung', tapi sebenarnya ikutkan, ayat yang saya nak cakap tu, tin tu kena kumpul banyak-banyak dan ikat, kalau bot tu dah tak boleh berfunction, tak ada function, kita duduk kat atas tu sebenarnya, kita boleh jadikan benda tu macam tempat kita duduk kalau bot tu tenggelam. [sic] (I was trying to say 'floating 'actually, for instance, we can collect a lot of empty cans and tie them together so that if there is a problem with the boat, we can sit on that. We can make it as a place for us to sit on when the boat has sunk.)*

In Table 6, Extract 3, a non-understanding signal was initiated by a vague message delivered by R2. Through a request for clarification, R1 expressed her difficulties in understanding how the cans can be a useful tool for a leaking boat. Hence, R2 tried to provide more explanation following the content trigger.

TABLE 7. Task complexity trigger and meaning negotiation sequences

Trigger type	Participant	Utterance	Extract 4	Meaning Negotiation Sequences
4. Task Complexity	*Source CL: P4: U39-46*			
	R7	39	**In front of the Stationer's Shop?**	T
	R8	40	Did you mean er front of the Gift Shop?	I
	SRI		*R8: Saya perhatikan pada gambar ni,ada sebuah kereta rosak betul-betul depan Stationer's shop, er depan gift shop. Saya agak kereta tu adalah kereta yang sama seperti Picture A. [sic]* *R8: I noticed that in this picture, there is a broken car, which is located exactly in front of the Gift Shop, so I guess that is the same car in Picture A.*	
	R7	41	Er, no.	
		42	**In my picture, the breakdown car is in front the Stationer's Shop**	R /T
		43	How about your picture?	
	R8	44	Did you mean the second car?	I
	SRI		*R8: Saya rasa ya (ada perselisihan faham), sebab saya ingatkannya first car, tapi bila dia cakap 'at the middle' and terus saya cakap kereta yang second. [sic]* *R8: I think there was a misunderstanding because I thought that it is the first car, but when she said that the car is 'at the middle', I immediately explained that it is actually the second car.*	
	R7	45	Yes, the the car the car that in the middle	R
	R8	46	Yes, I see it, the broken car at the Stationer's Shop	RR

In Table 7, Extract 4, both participants were caught in solving comprehension difficulties in their attempt to cope with the cognitive demands of the *Picture Differences* task. The second MN cycle (T-I-R-RR) was found embedded in the MN cycle which was first initiated (T-I-R). Basically, the participants were negotiating about the location of a broken car in their pictures. R8 indicated her confusion by requesting for clarification in both occasions (*Utterance 40 & 44*). As a result, R7 provided a more detailed explanation of the location of the car in her attempt to clarify the confusion.

To conclude, it was observed that the ways the listeners indicate their non-understanding will determine how the speakers will respond towards them. Clarification requests, as observed in Extract 1 (see *Table 4*), Extract 3 (see *Table 6*) and Extract 4 (see *Table 7*) have prompted the speakers to modify their language output whereas confirmation check, as noted in Extract 2 (see *Table 5*), has only resulted in a simple acknowledgement from the speaker without any attempt to modify the language output. Therefore, it is interesting to note that meaning negotiation, when it was accomplished through clarifications

requests, was more effective in pushing the speakers to modify their language output, hence providing more opportunities for language development.

FREQUENCY OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF TRIGGER

Next, in order to compare the ways in which the participants negotiate meaning in open and closed communicative tasks, the types of trigger initiated in both tasks were examined and the results are presented in the following table.

TABLE 8. Comparison of trigger types initiated in open and closed communicative tasks

Types of trigger	Communicative Tasks											
	Open						Closed					
	P1	P2	P3	P4	Total	%	P1	P2	P3	P4	Total	%
1. Lexical		1		1	2	14		1	6	4	11	24*
2. Phonetic			1		1	7					0	0
3. Content	3		3	4	10	71*		1		2	3	7
4. Task Complexity				1	1	7	2	3	5	22	32	70*
Total	3	1	4	6	14	100	2	5	11	28	46	100

P1= Pair 1, P2= Pair 2, P3= Pair 3, P4= Pair 4

An examination of the trigger types reveals that meaning negotiation was in fact triggered by different factors in open and closed communicative tasks. In open communicative tasks, content was the main trigger type, which accounts for 71% across all the four pairs of participants. On the other hand, task complexity and lexical triggers were identified as the main trigger types in closed communicative tasks, with an average of 70% and 24% respectively.

Although closed communicative tasks were found to trigger more meaning negotiation as compared to open communicative tasks, meaning negotiation was mainly triggered by task complexity and lexical difficulties, which might be due to task-related factors. However, in open communicative tasks, participants were mainly pushed to negotiate meaning due to the vague message conveyed by the participants; hence task-related factors were less significant in this case.

PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS ON OPEN AND CLOSED COMMUNICATIVE TASKS

An overview of participants' perceptions on both communicative tasks is presented in Figure 1.

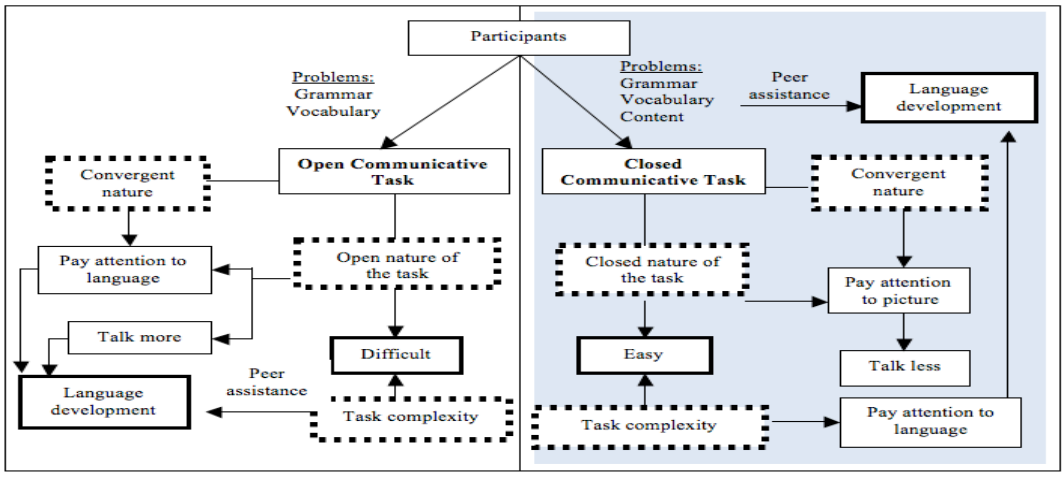

FIGURE 1. An overview of participants' perceptions on open and closed communicative tasks in relation to their language development

Open communicative tasks were perceived by students as more challenging than closed communicative tasks due to the tasks' open nature and complexity, resulting in difficulties in making justifications, retrieving the intended vocabularies, and constructing grammatically correct sentences. However, although open communicative tasks were generally perceived to be a more demanding task, there is still room for language development if peer assistance was sought for during the task.

Additionally, students reported that the convergent yet open nature of the task were able to push them to pay more attention to their language use, particularly in choosing items and making justifications resulting in the participants paying more attention to language during the open communicative task.

As for the closed communicative task, it was generally perceived as easier than the open communicative task due to the closed nature of the task and its reduced task complexity. As cited by a student, closed communicative task is easy as it only required the students to describe and confirm the picture differences. In contrast, the open communicative task was found to be comparatively more difficult than the closed communicative task as there is a reasoning component, hence suggesting that the former is more complex than the latter. It was also indicated that the closed communicative task was less cognitively demanding because a lot of contextual clues were provided, making target language production easier. The closed nature of the task and its convergent nature resulted in the participants paying more attention to the contextual cues provided in the picture, resulting in them talking less during the task.

Most of the participants (75%) perceived open communicative tasks as more difficult than closed communicative tasks. It was reported that open communicative tasks required the students to think actively in order to get ideas of what to talk about. This could be due to the open nature of the task, in which there is no one predetermined solution. Therefore, the task completion depends very much on negotiation between the interlocutors. Besides, since the task requires the students to work towards a convergence, that is to reach a mutually acceptable list of items to bring to the deserted island, they have no choice, but to come up with as many points as possible in order to persuade their conversational partner to accept their suggestion.

Grammar and vocabulary remain the main problems for the participants in both communicative tasks, in view of their limited language proficiency. In open communicative tasks, more than half of the participants (67%) reported that they have vocabulary problems. Participants' limited vocabulary in the target language was reported as the main factor accounting for the problems. However, in closed communicative tasks, besides grammar and vocabulary difficulties which account for 40% each, participants also have problems with content (20%) due to task complexity. This finding corresponds to the earlier finding that participants mainly negotiate meaning in closed communicative tasks due to their difficulties in understanding the content of the message, which is mainly caused by the task complexity.

To conclude, although the closed communicative task was generally perceived as easier than the open communicative task, the participants still have difficulties with grammar, vocabulary and content when they were engaged in the task. This could be due to their low language proficiency. However, these problems can actually push them towards language development when peer assistance was sought for during the task.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that the closed communicative task is more productive than the open communicative task, in terms of opportunities provided for learners to negotiate meaning, in line with the findings from other studies (Gass, Mackey & Ross-Feldman 2011, Nunan 1991,

Rahimpour 2007, 2008, 2010). The closed communicative task was found to yield greater meaning negotiation (MN) because as a two-way information gap activity, the participants have access only to a portion of the information needed for task completion.

The same finding was reported in Nakahama, Tyler and Van Lier's (2001) study, in which the information gap task was observed to result in more MN instances compared to a conversational task. As for the open communicative task, having shared access to the information needed for task completion, has obviously reduced the need for participants to negotiate meaning.

However, as open and closed communicative tasks differ in terms of their goal orientation, different interactional patterns were observed, in terms of the types of trigger initiated in both tasks. This finding also suggests that the frequency count of MN instances is insufficient to tell the value of a communicative task, further confirming the conclusion in Nakahama, Tyler and Van Lier (2001) and Pawlaks' (2006) studies.

In the open communicative task, MN was mainly triggered by participants' non-understanding of the content of the message delivered (Refer *Table 8*). This is because the task was designed in a way that requires participants to work towards convergence, which is to reach a mutually acceptable decision on which items to bring to the deserted island. The participants' main focus was thus on understanding the message because they need to express their views as whether they agree or disagree with the suggestions of their conversational partners. The overall understanding of their conversational partners' contribution will help them to make the decision as part of the task completion. Therefore, the participants mainly focused on getting the content of the message correctly.

On the other hand, MN was mainly triggered by task complexity in closed communicative tasks (Refer *Table 8*). This is because the participants were geared towards negotiating the information they had, as the goal of the task is to find the differences between the pictures.

Besides, MN triggered by participants' difficulties of understanding lexical items, such as discrete word groups and word choices, was also more prominent in the closed communicative task compared to the open communicative task (Refer *Table 8*). This is because in closed communicative tasks, participants were more concerned with understanding the lexical items used by their conversational partners, as these lexical items might indicate one of the picture differences.

This finding is partially supported by Nakahama, Tyler and Van Lier's (2001) findings, as they also revealed that lexical items were the main trigger types for the *Picture Differences* task in their study. However, in the present study, task complexity trigger was more prominent than lexical trigger. This could be due to the different proficiency level of the participants in the two studies. Nakahama, Tyler and Van Lier's (2001) study involved intermediate level ESL learners while only limited English language proficiency (LEP) learners participated in the present study. Non-understanding of the message due to task complexity was more common among LEP learners as they have limited language ability to express their ideas, hence resulting in the need for more meaning negotiation.

Although lexical trigger was not prominent in MN during open communicative tasks, it does not mean that the participants did not encounter any vocabulary problems during the tasks. In fact, data from the structured interview revealed that most of the participants have vocabulary difficulties during the open communicative task. This finding supports Bitchener's (2004) conclusion that an understanding of vocabulary is comparatively more important than the articulation of meaning with grammatical accuracy in decision-making tasks which requires participants to convey ideas and opinions.

Besides, a qualitative analysis of the meaning negotiation cycles also revealed that the ways in which the participants express their non-understanding signals (the types of trigger)

will, to a certain extent, determine the response to the triggers (Refer *Tables 4 -7*). Clarification requests were found to be more effective in prompting the speakers to modify their language output compared to confirmation checks, echoing the findings in Luciana's (2005) study, in which it was found that direct indicators, such as clarification requests can effectively lead to participants' language development compared to indirect indicators, such as echoing words from the previous utterance.

Similarly, this finding also echoed the results in Choi's (2003) study as it was found that clarification requests can initiate more negotiation of language output compared to confirmation checks with modification of triggers. This could be due to the nature of the former, which is a more explicit indication of non-understanding in MN. Furthermore, as this study involved only LEP learners, with limited language ability, the participants might resort to the simple acknowledgement of 'yes' or 'no' without any modification of their language output when they encounter a confirmation check in meaning negotiation, especially in the absence of the obvious pressure to give further explanation as compared to clarification requests.

The same finding offers further support to Bitchener's (2004) argument that non-modified signals, such as clarification requests, can better prompt the speakers to reformulate their utterances, which helps to explain why the modified signal, as evidenced by the confirmation checks used by the participants in this study, were rather ineffective in getting the participants to modify their language output as the target language model has already been provided.

Furthermore, it was also noted that although participants' lack of vocabulary was reported as the most prominent problem when they were engaged in open communicative tasks, it was observed that most of the MN in the open communicative task was in fact triggered by the participants' difficulties in understanding the message delivered by their conversational partners, which was not due to lexical problems (Refer *Table 8*). A discrepancy was thus noted when a high incidence of lexical triggers was observed during the closed communicative task.

This is because although most of the participants have difficulties with vocabulary during the open communicative task, some of them have already resorted to using vocabulary in the Malay language before any non-understanding occurred. Therefore, there was no room for MN. As demonstrated in Example 1, although R8 later asked R7 for the direct translation of the vocabulary '***barang***' in the target language, since both interlocutors can understand each other well, there was basically no communication breakdown, thus eliminating the need for further MN.

Example 1

R8	4	I think (cough) I agree with you
	5	and it's also can help er us to find er find **barang-barang**
	6	er, what's what the means barang?
R7	7	Er, things maybe item

As for the closed communicative task, most of the participants were engaged in MN initiated by task complexity, which could be due to the fact that the '*Picture Differences'* task contained more items to be discussed, which could cause more misunderstanding compared to the open communicative task.

Although closed communicative tasks were perceived to be less demanding, it actually posed a certain cognitive demand on the participants, as evidenced by the higher incidence of MN (Refer *Table 3*) and task complexity triggers (Refer *Table 8*). This finding corresponds to Skehan's (2003) Limited Attentional Capacity Model, which suggests that learners will be drawn to focus on meaning when the cognitive demand of a task is increased.

Participants' perceptions might also be influenced by task familiarity. As the open communicative task presents a hypothetical situation which requires participants to imagine if they need to survive on the deserted island, it has thus appeared to be less familiar compared to the closed communicative task, "*Picture differences'* which presents a real-life scene for the description. Besides, due to the visual support and contextual cues as well as its closed nature, closed communicative was therefore perceived as less demanding task. However, from the analysis of MN frequency, participants were found to negotiate more in the closed communicative task due to task complexity. It should, therefore be noted that the participants' perceptions have to be viewed with great caution as they might not be reflective of the real phenomenon.

It can thus be concluded that although the closed communicative task was perceived as cognitively less demanding for the participants, the task is, in actual fact, at an appropriate level of difficulty which is challenging enough to promote meaningful MN among the participants.

CONCLUSION

A lack of proper attention has been given to LEP learners due to the common belief that communicative tasks might not benefit them as much as intermediate or advanced learners. However, this study has unearthed an interesting finding which highlights the fact that this particular group of learners, is indeed capable of attending to communication breakdowns triggered by task complexity, lexical and content difficulties in meaning negotiation (MN). Furthermore, the finding that clarification requests can effectively prompt LEP learners to modify their language output during MN, also suggests that communicative tasks are able to meet the language needs of LEP learners in ways that are similar with other groups of learners, such as the learners of intermediate proficiency level in Luciana (2005) and Bitchener's (2004) studies. Besides, closed communicative tasks, which can yield higher incidence of MN compared to open communicative tasks, due to task complexity and lexical difficulties, can be manipulated for the purpose of teaching negotiation strategies in language classrooms.

However, it should be noted that although communicative tasks provide the opportunities for LEP learners to actively seek peer assistance in their attempts to bridge the linguistic gaps during MN, it was observed that not all the linguistic problems were ultimately resolved due to their limited language proficiency. Hence, there was the need for language teachers to monitor and provide more linguistic guidance in helping the target learners to benefit more from the communicative tasks. It is also advisable for language teachers to pair LEP learners with learners of higher level of language proficiency so as to trigger more clarification requests from the higher proficiency learners, thereby resulting in more pushed output on the part of the LEP learners. Furthermore, LEP learners' reliance on first language (L1) translation which greatly reduces the need for MN, also suggests that language teachers need to devote more attention to monitoring this group of learners as there is a risk for them to resort to L1 during communicative tasks. Therefore, with an understanding of how LEP learners approach communicative tasks, it is hoped that language teachers can better tailor the communicative tasks to suit the learning needs of LEP learners.

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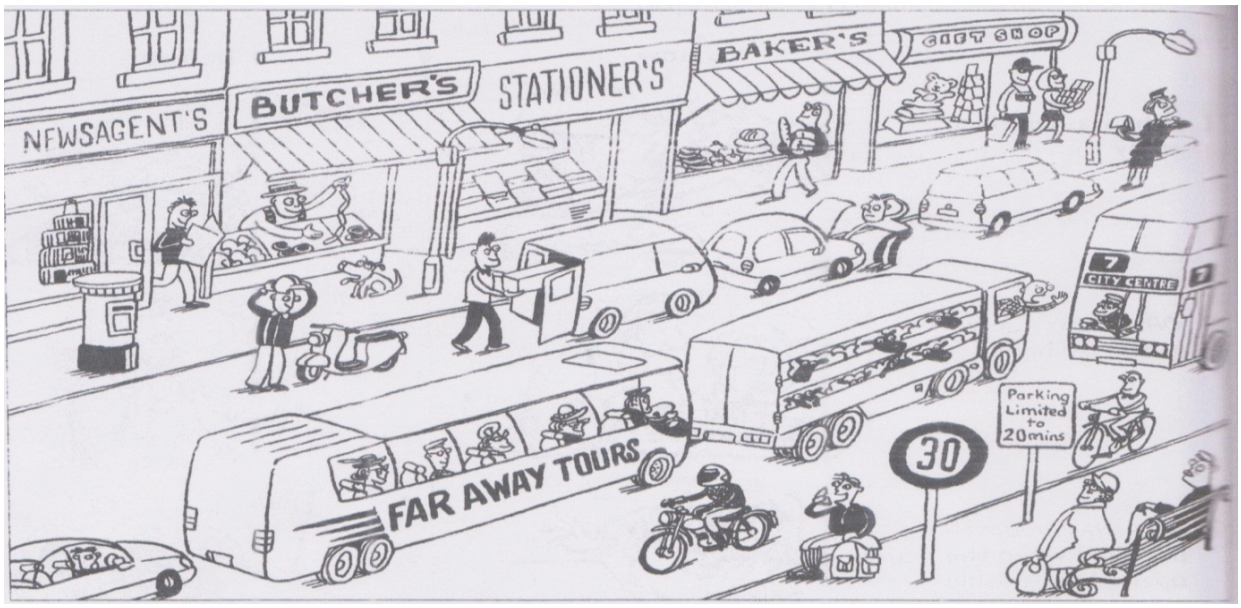
APPENDIX A

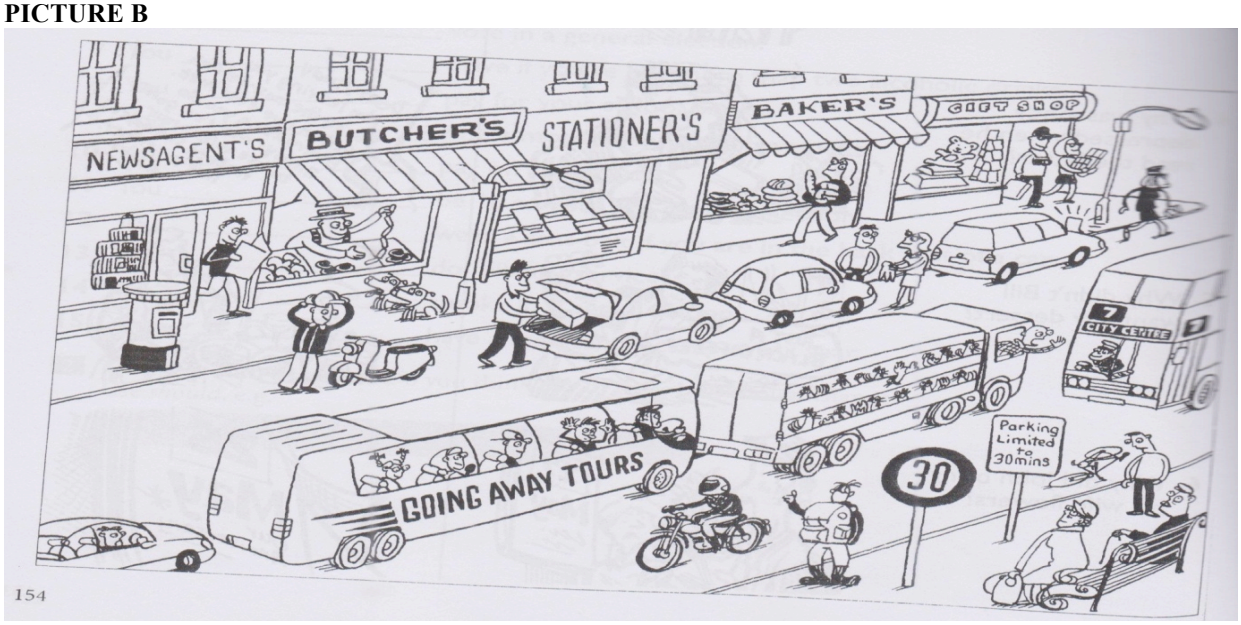
PICTURE DIFFERENCES

Instruction: There are 12 differences in Picture A and Picture B. Find at least 5 of the differences without looking at each other's picture. You have 10 minutes to plan what and how to say. However, you are only allowed to talk without your notes.

PICTURE A



PICTURE B



(Adapted from Oxenden, Lathan-Koenig & Seligson, 1999)

APPENDIX B

THE DESERT ISLAND

You are on a sinking ship. There is only one lifeboat left for your rescue. The boat can only hold a limited amount of supplies and people. You can see a small desert island in the distance. If your boat makes it there safely, you will need things to help you survive until you are rescued.

Instruction: Look at the following list of items that you have. Choose only five items that you will bring with you. Working with a partner, you must decide and agree mutually on which five items to take. You have 10 minutes to plan what and how to say. However, you are only allowed to talk without your notes.

Items	Tick (√) to indicate your choice
1. Torchlight	
2. Pillows	
3. Canned food	
4. Clothes	
5. Fresh water	
6. Knives	
7. Map	
8. Family documents	
9. Handphone	
10. First-aid kit	
11. Matches	
12. Gun	

(*Adapted from Sadow, 1982*)