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Nonoccurrence of Negotiation of Meaning in Task-Based Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication

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This empirical study investigated the occurrence of meaning negotiation in an interactive synchronous computer-mediated second language (L2) environment. Sixteen dyads ($N = 32$) consisting of nonnative speakers (NNSs) and native speakers (NSs) of English performed 2 different tasks using videoconferencing and written chat. The data were coded and analyzed both for instances of negotiation of meaning and for instances where the NNSs did not initiate repair despite nonunderstanding. Absences of negotiation of meaning are generally excluded from detailed analysis primarily because it is difficult to establish nonunderstanding unless the participant overtly indicates it. In order to assess the effect of the nonoccurrence of negotiation of meaning on task performance and task completion, this study used 2 tasks: a culturally specific task that almost certainly would result in NNS nonunderstanding and a collaborative decision-making task that should trigger instances of negotiation of meaning. It was found that, in both tasks, instead of initiating repair sequences, NNS participants frequently did not engage in negotiation of meaning despite nonunderstanding. We conclude that disregarding nonoccurrence of negotiation of meaning in (digital) task-based language teaching may lead to misrepresenting task performance, task outcome, and task evaluation, and, beyond that, to disregarding evidence that has both empirical and theoretical consequences for the Interaction Hypothesis and, by implication, for second language acquisition.

Keywords: negotiation of meaning; task-based language teaching; L2 learning; video conferencing; chat; SCMC

IN THE EARLY 1980S, LONG (1981) INTRODUCED one of the most influential theoretical frameworks for understanding second language (L2) learning, the Interaction Hypothesis. It claims that L2 learning occurs by interacting with others and by engaging in conversation mod-

ifications during a breakdown in communication, particularly in interactions between native speakers (NSs) and nonnative speakers (NNSs). At the time, Long (1981, 1983) named different types of indicators of nonunderstanding, usually performed in the turn after the trouble source, such as clarification requests, where the hearer requests assistance (see Example 1), or comprehension checks, where the hearer checks or seeks confirmation of understanding (see Example 2).

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EXAMPLE 1: NNS Clarification Request

Turn	Speaker	Transcript
1.	NS	Did you get a Christmas hamper this year?
2.	NNS	What's a hamper?

EXAMPLE 2: NNS Comprehension Check

Turn	Speaker	Transcript
1.	NS	Did you get a Christmas hamper this year?
2.	NNS	Do you mean a basket with goodies?

A more specific operationalization of the Interactionist Hypothesis was provided with so-called negotiation of meaning episodes, defined as a series of conversational turns in which one of the interactants, usually the learner, stops the conversational flow due to nonunderstanding and negotiates for meaning in order to solve a breakdown in communication. Specifically, Varonis & Gass (1985) proposed a two-part structure for negotiation of meaning: a *trigger*, the source of the nonunderstanding, and a *resolution*, an indicator of nonunderstanding by the hearer, followed by a clarification of the trouble source by the speaker.

More than three decades later, Mackey, Abuhl, & Gass (2012) essentially confirmed the central assumptions of the Interaction Hypothesis, stating that “the interactional ‘work’ that occurs when learners and their interlocutors encounter some kind of communication breakdown is beneficial for L2 development” (p. 9). There has been a shift, however, from an earlier exclusive reliance on textbook-based activities (Hatch, 1978; Long, 1983; Mackey, 1999) to the incorporation of task-based technology-enhanced learning environments, both through videoconferencing (Lee, 2007; Monteiro, 2014; Wang, 2006; Yanguas, 2010), and text-based chat (Blake, 2000; Fernández-García & Martínez-Arbeláiz, 2002; Kost, 2008; Lee, 2001, 2007; O'Rourke, 2005; van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014). For written chat, Smith (2003) proposed initial changes to the Varonis & Gass (1985) model in order to accommodate specific constraints and affordances of the medium, such as nonadjacent discourse patterns that lead to “split negotiation routines” (p. 48).

Despite its undeniable prominence in second language acquisition (SLA) research, the Interaction Hypothesis has yielded mixed findings. On the one hand, numerous studies have reported a high incidence of negotiation of meaning in

experimental settings and confirmed that these episodes enhanced comprehension and internalization of linguistic features, which are claimed to be beneficial for the language learning process (Long, 1981, 1985; Nakahama, Tyler, & van Lier, 2001; Pica, 1991, 1992, 1994; Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1987; Varonis & Gass, 1985). On the other hand, a not insignificant number of studies found little negotiation of meaning in the L2 classroom and critiqued the proposal as, perhaps, providing a useful template for laboratory research but having little import for the real-world setting of the L2 classroom (Eckerth, 2009; Foster, 1998; Foster & Ohta, 2005; Slimani-Rolls, 2005). Specifically, Foster (1998) concluded that it was “too fragile to bear the weight of SLA theory” (p. 19) and observed that learners do not put the ongoing discourse on hold by declaring nonunderstanding. Instead, most interactants adopted a strategy of pretending to understand and hoping that later clues in the interaction would resolve the problem. In his replication of Foster's study, Eckerth (2009) drew a similar conclusion.

The main reason for the paucity of instances of negotiation of meaning in classroom studies is that having to own up to nonunderstanding during interaction emphasizes lack of success, a potentially face-threatening and frustrating admission (Aston, 1986; Foster & Ohta, 2005). Indeed, Slimani-Rolls (2005) concluded that learners tend to behave on the basis of social rather than pedagogical motives mainly because having to display ignorance during classroom interaction can jeopardize personal and social relationships.

Further investigation of negotiating of meaning elaborated on environments and conditions that are more or less conducive to its occurrence. It was found, for example, that it is more likely to occur in NNS–NNS dyads rather than between NSs and NNSs (Varonis & Gass, 1985), during required information exchange tasks rather than in optional information exchanges (Foster, 1998; Smith, 2003), with lexical items rather than grammatical morphology (Foster, 1998; Pica, Kanagy, & Falodun, 1993), in small groups rather than in dyads (Doughty & Pica, 1986; Eckerth, 2009; Foster, 1998; Rulon & McCreary, 1986); and with written chat rather than in face-to-face videoconferencing (van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014).

Finally, as Foster & Ohta (2005) have pointed out, the conceptualization of negotiation of meaning in SLA research seems gradually to have shifted from an earlier assumption of communication breakdown between learners to recasting in classroom situations where repair is often initiated by the teacher or expert speaker. In this

article, we return to the notion of negotiation of meaning as it was originally defined and observe and analyze it in the environment of digital dyadic interaction between both native and nonnative participants.

TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING IN DIGITAL SETTINGS

A major pedagogical paradigm that has adopted the Interaction Hypothesis is task-based language teaching (TBLT). The processes and techniques involved in teaching a foreign language within a TBLT environment have been reported on extensively and cannot be restated here (a good review is provided by Adams, 2009). What is important for this study is that, in TBLT, language should be considered a “tool for communication rather than as sets of phonological, grammatical and lexical items to be memorized” (Nunan, 2004, p. 7). The tasks that serve as the basic units of the learning curriculum should therefore focus on meaning and communication rather than on language forms. Accordingly, Nunan (2004) defines a task as “a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form” (p. 4). In short, the conditions for language use should be “similar to what goes on in unmonitored day-to-day social intercourse” (Block, 2003, p. 61).¹ Ideally, then, while working on a task, language learners should be so focused on the outcome that they are hardly aware of the fact that they are practicing a foreign language in an institutional environment.

This interest on the part of TBLT in ‘authentic’ communication is, perhaps, even more prominent in the context of digital communication (Lai & Li, 2011; Motteram & Thomas, 2010). Technology-enhanced learning environments that are now available in L2 classrooms link up language learners and native speakers of the target language and provide the opportunity to digitally collaborate on tasks. In examining how the new technologies and new literacies might influence education, Kellner (2000) went as far as calling them “the most significant ... revolution for education since the transition from oral to print and book based teaching” (p. 246); and Motteram and Thomas (2010) claimed that the importance of technology-mediated communication in the classroom, and the digital aptitude and expectations learners bring to class, make it “no longer

possible to see how the future of task-based language teaching can proceed without greater consideration of technology-mediated tasks” (p. 235).

In order to probe more deeply into factors affecting some of the earlier nonconclusive research, the present study uses the environment of technology to investigate those instances where negotiation routines do not occur in ways one might have expected. It does so in the specific environment of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC), an environment that is particularly conducive to studying this phenomenon for its empirical insights and, possibly, for its theoretical implications.

HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The central premise of the negotiation of meaning paradigm is that a trouble source is followed by an indicator of nonunderstanding as a first move in (and initiation of) a repair sequence and that there is a change of speaker after the trouble source. Following basic insights from conversation analysis (e.g., Sacks, 1972; Schegloff, 1968), one might describe the trouble source and the indicator as an adjacency pair. Uttered by different speakers, in two separate turns, the occurrence of the first (trouble source) part establishes a set of expectations for the second (indicator) part, making this move conditionally relevant. In reverse, if nonoccurrence happens, that is, if the second turn of the adjacency pair is not realized, this absence is significant and demands closer scrutiny for its violation of conversational norms.

As stated, TBLT emphasizes that “language is used pragmatically to achieve some nonlinguistic outcome” (Ellis, 2003, p.16). It should approximate authentic language use, such that L2 learners involved in the performance of a task “forget where they are and why they are there” (Ellis, 2003, p. 252). However, if this goal is actually achieved, it could set up a curious contradiction: While the kind of communicative norms governing most classrooms as instructional settings may lead us to expect that learners will acknowledge nonunderstanding and, therefore, negotiate for meaning, that is not the case in authentic informal conversational settings. Here, quite different expectations come into play, most especially a tolerance for uncertainty (cf. Bannink, 2002; Firth & Wagner, 1997); a preference for self-repair; and, most important, a distinct dispreference for the kind of other-initiation of repair that is assumed in the negotiation of meaning model (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). Technology-driven settings are increasingly understood as hybrid communicative

TABLE 1
Outline of Telecollaboration Project

-
-
- (a) 60-minute group-to-group videoconferencing session (teachers on both ends report on the nature and scope of the telecollaboration project; participants briefly introduce themselves).
 - (b) Dyadic SCMC task performance: exchanging cultural jokes and discussing cultural humor as a basis for script writing (focus of this study)
 - (c) Multiple group-to-group and dyadic videoconferencing sessions (script writing, rehearsals)
 - (d) Digital theater performance
-

environments between the classroom and authentic communication. This means that not only should one expect considerable variation in learners' handling of negotiation for meaning, but, also paradoxically, fewer occurrences where learners interpret their nonunderstanding as an occasion for the kind of negotiation of meaning that underpins the Interaction Hypothesis.

Accordingly, the study has the following research questions:

- RQ1. To what extent does nonoccurrence of negotiation of meaning occur in and influence task-based dyadic NS–NNS interaction in the context of SCMC?
- RQ2. What factors contribute to nonoccurrence of negotiation of meaning in SCMC?

THE STUDY

Design and Methodology

The study reported here is part of a larger digital task-based group-to-group collaboration project between two cohorts of Dutch and Australian students working together on writing and creating a digital theater performance on Dutch immigration into Australia. For a period of 6 weeks the students worked with a variety of digital platforms, both asynchronous (email, Facebook, wiki) and synchronous (live chat, one-to-one video calling, and group-to-group videoconferencing). Here, we zoom in on the introductory task (see (b) in Table 1) that was performed by NS and NNS dyads as the introduction to the ensuing telecollaboration project. The NNSs performed the task from the university computer lab, each individual student in a particular time slot; due to the time difference, the Australian participants performed the task from their home computers. Time on task was approximately 1 hour.

Participants

The participants ($N = 32$) were two groups of undergraduate students: 16 Dutch humanities

students taking a minor in advanced English language acquisition, and 16 Australian drama and education students. The students were randomly selected from both cohorts and placed into dyads. The L2 proficiency level of all NNS participants was advanced, approximately at the B2/C1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR): Participants were able to “interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party,” as stated in the CEFR definition of the B2 level.

Data

The data consist of approximately 12 hours of videoconferencing recordings, and print-outs of the written chat sessions. The videoconferencing sessions were split screen recorded with Video Call recorder for Skype®, transcribed, and coded² for both NNS-initiated negotiation of meaning and nonoccurrence of negotiation of meaning. Observations of prosodic, paralinguistic, and nonverbal features of the interactions, such as body language, facial expressions, intonation, and pauses, were added to the transcript wherever relevant. The chat script logs (as saved automatically on Skype), include time between turns and the emoticons that were used by the participants.

Task Design

Designing tasks for advanced L2 learners that will provoke instances of negotiation of meaning is a challenging enterprise. For this study, a task was developed involving humor because of its potentially high density of triggers for meaning negotiation. Ludic language, or language play, is argued to be an essential part of advanced L2 proficiency (Cook, 2000; Vandergriff & Fuchs, 2009). In a study on advanced L2 learning, Byrnes (2012) observed that L2 learners at this level need to be “highly aware language users, with regard to the language as a culturally embedded system for making meanings . . .” (p. 515). Following

Cook (2000), Broner & Tarone (2001) argue that the more advanced, proficient, and mature the L2 learners, the more skilled they are in participating in playful, or ludic, language talk. In her study into humor in the L2 classroom, Bell (2009) proposes that “humor has been touted as an excellent way for students to learn the vocabulary, syntax, semantics, and discourse conventions of the target language” (p. 241), but adds that “humorous communication is extremely complex in both its forms and functions” (p. 242). Not surprisingly, then, research into responses to humor has indicated that failure to understand jokes has a greater impact on hearers than not understanding other forms of discourse or speech acts (Bell, 2013; Bell & Attardo, 2010; Sacks, 1974) since the hearer is afraid to be exposed as humorless and culturally incompetent. If a joke falls flat for any reason, the face of both speaker and hearer is severely threatened. To counterbalance the influence of task design on task performance (cf. Breen, 1987), the study involves a second, purposely different, two-way task, to be performed by a control group consisting of six NS–NNS dyads. Requiring considerable amounts of consensus-building—and, by implication, negotiation of meaning—the Things-in-Pocket type task, as developed by Samuda (2001), instructs participants to exchange wish lists of fictitious characters and to reach consensus on a present for each of their characters (cf. Smith, 2003).

Task 1: The Jokes Task. Each of the 16 NS participants was instructed to communicate four jokes or riddles given on their task sheets: two through Skype videoconferencing and two through Skype text-based chat (with the webcam turned off). It was left up to the participants to decide who would start or in what order the jokes would be exchanged. The NNS participants were also given four culturally specific jokes to be communicated to their Australian counterparts. The jokes were given in Dutch so the NNSs had to translate them during the live interaction. Since the study focuses on NNS-initiated negotiation of meaning only, data from this part of the exchange will not be discussed in this study.

In the instructions to the participants the task was presented as an exchange of jokes between NS and NNS in order to compare and contrast cultural humor. Participants were to (a) introduce themselves and get to know each other (approximately 5–10 minutes), (b) exchange jokes as an illustration of each other’s cultural humor (approximately 20 minutes), (c) discuss (Australian/Dutch) humor in general (approx-

imately 10 minutes), and (d) consider whether and how cultural humor could be used in their collaborative script writing for the digital play (approximately 10–15 minutes).

Since the task was embedded in the institutional context of the telecollaboration project, the joke telling part of the NS–NNS exchange clearly differed from the ‘normal’ informal, conversational setting where jokes or humorous comments are dropped unannounced. The occurrence of jokes was contextually announced (Attardo, 1993). Additionally, participants were informed that the task was to serve as a stepping stone toward the telecollaboration project (see (c) in Table 1). The data in Example 3, a snapshot from the discussion part of the task of one of the dyads (after the jokes had been exchanged), illustrate this point. They show that the jokes did indeed serve as relevant prompts for discussion: Both NSs and NNSs commented on how they could incorporate the jokes they had just exchanged into the script and the performance.

EXAMPLE 3: Jokes Task Embedded in the Script Writing Telecollaboration Project

-
- | | |
|-----|--|
| NS | [11:06:39] I also think, based even upon our conversation now, that there is heaps of stuff about miscommunication on skype that we can work with in our performances and especially with barriers between different cultural colloquialisms |
| NS | [11:07:15] there are certain things about each of our jokes that the other didn’t quite understand, and we could play on that :D |
| NNS | [11:07:41] haha yes, it was quite difficult at times |
| NNS | [11:08:13] and Dutch people tend to make fun of others and Aussies make fun of themselves, so that could be used as well |
-

Task 2: Things-in-Pocket. A control task that would involve collaborative decision making was created. It was assumed that it provided affordances for negotiating meaning should that be necessary. It was carried out by six dyads ($N = 12$). In this task, each participant had to exchange 12 lexical items that were on the birthday wish lists of potential host families. Since this study focuses on NNS-initiated negotiation of meaning, only the items communicated by the NS are included and only quantitative data are reported (see Table 2).

In order to establish the near-certainty of NNS nonunderstanding in both tasks, a pilot group

TABLE 2
Quantitative Data on (Non)occurrence of) Negotiation of Meaning

Jokes Task	Videoconferencing	Written Chat	Total
Instances of NNS-initiated NoM	5	6	11
Instances of nonoccurrence of NoM	10	3	13
Other ³	4	6	10
Total number of jokes communicated	19	15	34
Collaborative Decision-Making Task	Videoconferencing	Written Chat	Total
Instances of NNS-initiated NoM	10	13	23
Instances of nonoccurrence of NoM	15	10	25
Other ⁴	11	13	24
Total number of items communicated	36	36	72

Note. NNS = Nonnative speaker; NoM = Negotiation of meaning.

of 77 NNS students that were not part of the study—but belonged to a similar cohort of students in terms of age, background, proficiency level, teaching module—were asked in an anonymous written questionnaire to indicate their (non)understanding of the Australian jokes and Things-in-Pockets items from this study.

Data Sources and Analytical Procedures

As Varonis and Gass (1985) pointed out, it is difficult for the investigator to determine whether (non)understanding has occurred if negotiation of meaning is not initiated. This holds particularly for a task that focuses on jokes, since there is a ritual, formulaic—and therefore inherently ambiguous—response to humor and jokes: laughter (or one of its text-based or emoticon-based alternatives in chat) after the punchline. Although, as Bell (2005) observes, laughter can also indicate nervousness, embarrassment, or surprise, laughter in response to a joke still makes it easy for the participants to claim understanding (cf. Koole, 2010). This presents the researcher with an analytical challenge: how to distinguish true from feigned understanding. Clearly, only fine-grained analysis based on interactional detail, and the use of learner meta-data for triangulation (Flick, 2004; Green & Wallat, 1981) can establish (non)understanding. To address this issue, we used the following data sources and analytical procedures:

Inclusion of Multimodal Data. Since nonunderstanding is not always—in fact preferably not (Schegloff et al., 1977)—expressed verbally, covert nonverbal signals by the NNSs after a planted trouble source, such as long intra-turn pauses; knitting or raising of eyebrows; and prosodic features, such as distinct intonation con-

tours, were transcribed and analyzed. In cases of doubt, episodes of understanding and nonunderstanding by the same NNS were compared and contrasted.

Inclusion of Larger Units of Analysis. Longer interactional sequences, stretching over multiple turns and beyond the boundaries of the particular negotiation of meaning sequence, were considered in order to find evidence of (non)understanding. For example, an NNS utterance like “I hope I get it this time” before a new joke is communicated makes the fuzzy NNS claim of understanding after the previous joke less convincing.

Use of Meta-Data. Three sources of meta-data were used. First, prior to the beginning of the study, in a pilot investigation, 77 NNS students anonymously filled out a questionnaire to indicate their (non)understanding of the Australian jokes and the Things-in-Pocket items. In addition, a post-task questionnaire was anonymously filled out by all NNS participants. They were asked questions such as: *Did you understand all the Australian jokes your Australian counterpart told you? If not, what did you do?* Finally, stimulated recall questions posed by the researchers to the NNS participants were used to further clarify the existence of lack of mutual understanding (Gass & Mackey, 2000).

RESULTS

Each of the 10 NS jokes task participants was instructed to communicate four jokes to their NNS counterpart, two through chat and two through videoconferencing. Out of these 40 jokes, 34 were in fact communicated during task performance; 15 through chat and 19 through videoconferenc-

ing; six jokes were not communicated due to time constraints.

The analytical procedure outlined previously revealed 11 instances of NNS-initiated next-turn negotiation of meaning, but the analysis also identified 13 instances of nonoccurrence of negotiation of meaning, during which the NNS feigned understanding instead of starting a negotiation of meaning sequence. In other words, during videoconferencing, in more than half of the cases, mutual understanding was not established because NNSs did not initiate meaning negotiation; during chat 20% of such instances remained non-negotiated.

Importantly, despite the markedly different designs and complexities of the two tasks, nonoccurrence of negotiation of meaning describes performance in both tasks in nearly 35% of instances of possible need to negotiate, as is shown in Table 2.

DATA ANALYSIS

This section presents a qualitative analysis of a selection of examples of videoconferencing and written chat jokes task data with a focus on NNS and NS behavior before, during, and after instances of nonoccurrence of negotiation of meaning and the influence of this behavior on (successful) task completion.

EXAMPLE 4

In this example the Australian NS communicates a joke to her Dutch NNS counterpart through videoconferencing. The questionnaire filled out by the nonparticipant peer group in the pilot investigation indicated that there is just a 1.3% chance that the NNS will understand the joke without initiating repair: Only 1 of the 77 students of the pilot group indicated recognizing the pun that ultimately determines the sexual content of the joke. In other words, although it could be argued that the sexual connotation of the joke could influence NNS negotiation behavior, the NNS is not expected to recognize or identify this inference as such.

Videoconferencing, Dyad 1 (NS and NNS are Female)

Turn	Speaker	Transcript and Observations
1.	NS	Yeah, it's just kinda about Australian culture and there's a lot of slang so if you don't understand just let me know.

2.	NNS	[NNS leans towards screen, nods head in affirmation and smiles]
3.	NS	Two Aussie cattle drovers are standing in an outback bar. One asked, "What are you up to, Mate?" Ahh, I'm takin' a mob of 6000 from Goondiwindi to Gympie" [NNS leans towards screen, raises eyebrows, squints eyes] Oh yeah . . . and what route are you takin'?" "Ah probably the Misses; after all, she stuck by me durin' the drought."
4.	NNS	[3-second silence, giggles briefly, fidgets with scarf, takes scarf off, tosses hair]
5.	NNS	OK, yeah. [flat intonation – no laughter]
6.		[silence – 3 seconds]
7.	NS	Do you get that? [rising intonation]
8.	NNS	[while fidgeting with scarf] Yeah well, I'm not sure if I got all the words correctly but . . .
9.	NS	OK
10.	NNS	That's probably because of the slang so . . . [shakes head] I'm not that familiar with Aussie slang so . . . [looking down on her task sheet] Yeah, I think it's typically Dutch to make fun of other European countries, especially the Germans and the Belgians.
11.	NS	Yeah, why do you do that? [. . .]
39.	NNS	The basics of Dutch jokes is to make fun of others, preferably Belgian or German . . .
40.	NS	Ok, well, the other joke that I told you before was uhm . . . a lot of our jokes are very sexist and uhm, he was sort of asking one guy like 'what route are you going to take' . . . it's really bad . . .
41.	NNS	So you're saying Australian jokes are all to make fun of Australian people?
42.	NS	Yeah
43.	NNS	Ok. I get it. I think the Dutch don't do that.

The NS starts the exchange with a presequence (Schegloff, 1988), indicating to the NNS that she expects trouble (turn 1). By adding an overt

invitation to negotiate for meaning—if you don't understand just let me know—the NS shows task-appropriate behavior: It is important for task performance that repair is initiated if nonunderstanding occurs. At the same time, the presequence acts as a politeness strategy that guards the NNS's—and NS's—own face by suggesting that it is perfectly normal to negotiate for meaning. In turn 2, the NNS acknowledges the NS's invitation to repair with paralinguistic continuation signals such as smiling and nodding in affirmation. While the joke unfolds and after the punchline has been delivered, the NNS transmits contradictory messages. On the one hand, she gives the ritually appropriate paralinguistic response of laughter, or rather, a short giggle, and verbally claims understanding (albeit not very convincingly: her *ok, yeah* (turn 5) is pronounced with a flat intonation). But the nonverbal signals that she gives off (raising eyebrows, squinting eyes, leaning toward the screen) provide covert indicators of nonunderstanding. The NS's comprehension check in turn 7 (*do you get that?*) is an explicit invitation to negotiate for meaning, which is reinforced prosodically (intonation expressing disbelief). Again, the NNS's response is ambiguous: She does not reply directly to the NS's question, but instead admits that she probably did not get all the words correctly. When the NS simply acknowledges this statement, she continues along these lines and then, rather abruptly, moves away from the Australian joke to Dutch humor.

Although the interaction in Example 4 potentially holds all the primes of a nonunderstanding sequence, negotiation of meaning does not occur.⁵ This may well be the reason that, approximately 30 conversational turns later, during the same session (turn 40),⁶ the NS initiates a delayed attempt to finish the task successfully by returning to the joke. But again, the NNS does not respond. Instead, she moves away from the face-threatening incomprehensible details of the joke toward the broader, and safer, topic of Australian humor in general: *So you're saying Australian jokes are all to make fun of Australian people?* (turn 41). And again, the NS prioritizes face over task, by not badgering the NNS about not negotiating the joke (turn 42).

So, although Example 4 concerns interactions that took place in an institutional task-based language learning context, with NNS nonunderstanding intentionally planted into the discourse, the NNS does not initiate repair. Looking at the data from a social perspective, one

finds striking resemblances to Goffman's (1967) description of features of the interaction ritual. Although Goffman's examination of face-to-face interaction targets informal, conversational settings, these data suggest that his observations also apply to (digital) interaction processes in task-based institutional settings for L2 learning. For instance, the NNS resorts to a communication strategy that Goffman identified as an avoidance process:

As defensive measures, [the interactant] keeps off topics and away from activities that would lead to the expression of information that is inconsistent with the line he is maintaining. At opportune moments he will change the topic of conversation or the direction of activity. (p. 16)

As we have observed, in the present data, the NNS continues to maintain the line that she has understood the joke. Once she has feigned understanding, there is no turning back, despite her counterpart's initial—and delayed—task-appropriate efforts to challenge her claims of understanding (cf. van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014).

Meanwhile, the NS behaves according to what Goffman (1967) has labeled protective maneuvers:

The person shows respect and politeness, making sure to extend to others any ceremonial treatment that might be their due. He employs discretion; he leaves unstated facts that might implicitly or explicitly contradict and embarrass the positive claims made by others [. . .] so that the others' face is preserved even if their welfare is not. (p. 16)

In the context of our data, “welfare” in the last sentence could be substituted by “task” since acting in the interest of face tends to disagree with acting in the interest of the task. Although the NS does initially act in the interest of the task, by attempting to explain the joke despite her counterpart's claims of understanding, she does not explicitly confront the NNS with the fact that it is highly unlikely that she will have grasped the punchline. In other words, the NS initially acts in the interest of the task but, in the interest of protecting her counterpart's face, does not do so insistently enough, and ultimately accepts the NNS's change in direction of the activity when the joke is abandoned.

EXAMPLE 5

In contrast with Example 4, where the NS makes two (failed) attempts to act in the interest of the task (turns 7 and 40), the NS in Example 5 fully credits the NNS's claims of understanding and does not question them at all.

Videoconferencing, Dyad 2 (NS is Female; NNS is Male)

Turn	Speaker	Transcript and Observations
1.	NS	[reads from task sheet]: You know that you're Australian when [list intonation] you know that stubbies can be either drunk or worn . . .
2.	NNS	Yeah
3.	NS	You can translate: "Dazza and Shazza played Acca Dacca on the way to Maccas." You know, whatever the tourist books say, that no one says "cobber."
4.	NNS	[laughs] . . . that's actually funny
5.	NS	[laughs] They are funny, aren't they?
6.	NNS	[looking down] Do you already know that joke, or . . .?
7.	NS	No, I've never heard any of these.
8.	NNS	Me neither [looking down] How is the Australian humor in general?
9.	NS	Derogatory [laughs]. . .
10.	NNS	[Laughs]
11.	NS	We like to make fun of people [laughs] . . . as you can tell.
12.	NNS	[laughs] We like to make fun about German people . . . and about Belgian people . . .
13.		[NNS elaborates on Dutch jokes about Belgians]
14.	NNS	Let's see [looking down on task sheet]. . .yeah . . . can we use it in our play?

None of the 77 students in the pilot group understood the joke and, when questioned about it later, the NNS in this data also readily admitted that he did not have a clue what the joke was about or what the word 'derogatory' in line 9 meant. Nevertheless, the backchannel he produces in line 2 and his appreciative laughter right after the punchline in line 4 claim understanding of the joke. His strategy to cover up for his nonunderstanding resembles the NNS's in Example 1: He simply quickly changes the topic of the interaction, first by asking (in turn 6) whether his Australian counterpart has heard the joke before, and then by inquiring about the Australian sense of humor (turn 8), the answer to which turns out to contain another trouble source, the word *derogatory*. Again the NNS does not initiate repair; instead, as a response he echoes his counterpart's laughter (turns 9 and 10), once again claiming

understanding. His conversational strategy (not creating disfluency and waiting for the speaker to self-correct) pays off: In his next turn the NS paraphrases the trouble source, *We like to make fun of people [laughs] . . . as you can tell*. The NNS is now able to give a coherent response to the NS's observation. He keeps the floor and initiates a topic change: He directs the conversation to part 3 of the task, away from the territory of Australian humor that has turned out to be fraught with danger.

EXAMPLE 6

In Example 6, a written chat sequence, the same joke from Example 4 (with a 1.3% chance of NNS understanding) is communicated by the NS. As can be seen from this example, the NS's solidarity with the NNS during the interaction becomes an impediment to task completion.

Written Chat,⁷ Dyad 3 (NS is Male; NNS is Female)

Turn	Messenger	Chat Script and Time Between Turns
1.	NS	[11:36:45] [. . .] One asked, "what are you up to mate?" Ahh, I'm takin' a mob of 6000 from Goondiwindi to Gympie" "Oh yeah . . .and what route are you takin'?" "Ah, probably the Missus; after all, she stuck by me durin' the drought."
2.		Pause (1 minute)
3.	NNS	[11:37:43] Lol, i toke me i minute before i understand the joke ☺
4.	NS	[11:37:55] Me too haha
5.	NNS	[11:38:07] also because of my English
6.	NS	[11:38:32] I wish I could use that excuse, I'm just slow with jokes lol
7.	NNS	[11:39:05] i think we should start the video chat now, otherwise i'm rudding out of time

After the NS sends the joke in turn 1, there is a one-minute pause before the NNS responds. When she finally does so, in turn 3, she gives an account (Pomerantz, 1988) for her delayed answer—I *toke me a minute before I understand the*

joke—which is sandwiched between two paralinguistic signs of understanding (*LOL*⁸ and ☺). By claiming to identify with the NNS—*Me too haha*> (turn 4)—the NS resorts to a “strategy of involvement” (Scollon & Scollon, 1995, p. 37), or “ritual of solidarity” (Aston, 1986, p. 139), a type of ‘I know what you mean, I feel the same way’ comment as a signal that “the speaker is asserting that he or she is closely connected to the hearer” (Scollon & Scollon, 1995, p. 37). He protects his counterpart’s face by implying that a delayed response is perfectly normal because he had a similar experience. In turn 5, the NNS elaborates on her original account adding that her ‘English’ also slowed her down, which can be seen as an oblique, hedged indicator of nonunderstanding. The NS does not respond, however, and again emphasizes his solidarity with the NNS—*I wish I could use that excuse, I’m just slow with jokes lol*—suggesting that taking your time to understand a joke because of ‘your English’ is less face-threatening than being ‘just slow with jokes.’ The entire sequence, then, can be said to be about the negotiation of face performed by both participants: The NNS is saving her face, and the NS is preserving his counterpart’s face, both ultimately at the expense of the task. As in the previous example, the NNS makes a “gracious withdrawal” (Goffman, 1967, p. 15) from the joke, by urging the NS to move on to the videoconferencing task because she is ‘running out of time.’

EXAMPLES 7 AND 8

Examples 7 and 8 are instances of delayed NNS declarations of nonunderstanding. In both cases, the NNSs essentially admit at a later stage of the interaction—after the joke exchange episode—to not having started repair at the point in the interaction where it was sequentially due. None of the NSs, however, read this as a possibly deferred attempt at completing the task successfully. Instead, they either simply accept or even ignore their counterparts’ confessions without retracing that particular part of the task.

EXAMPLE 7: Videoconferencing, Dyad 4 (NS and NNS are Male)

Turn	Speaker	Transcript and Observations
1.	NS	I think Australian jokes are just really . . . just like every other joke, but with that bit of . . .
2.	NNS	[laughs] Australia

3.	NS	Exactly . . . exactly
4.	NNS	Yeah, just with Australian terms in it . . . and they are really hard [laughs] . . . yeah. . . [embarrassed tone] I didn’t quite get them all ⁹ uhhmm . . . [fiddles; looks down] yeah . . .
5.	NS	Those jokes were a bit peculiar . . . like they’re a bit . . . how can I say it . . .
6.	NNS	Over the top?
7.	NS	No, it’s really . . . specific . . . specific I would say
8.	NNS	OK, specific . . .

In Example 7, it is not until the discussion of Australian humor in general that the NNS declares he did not quite get all the Australian jokes from the second part of the task (turn 4). In other words, at the time the Australian jokes were communicated, the NNS failed to negotiate for meaning, but during part 3 of the task he admits to having pretended understanding in part 2: *they were really hard [laughs] . . . yeah . . . [embarrassed tone] I didn’t quite get them all uhhmm . . . [looking down, fiddling] yeah*. If at this point the NS were to act in the interest of the task, he would retrace the task and explain the jokes. Instead, the NS behaves according to what Goffman (1967) refers to as “the rule of considerateness” (p. 11): He implies that nonunderstanding was understandable since the jokes were ‘a bit peculiar’ and ‘specific.’

EXAMPLE 8: Videoconferencing, Dyad 5 (NS is Male; NNS is Female)

Turn	Speaker	Transcript
1.	NNS	(about turning to chat): you have to type your jokes so then I can read slowly and maybe I get the jokes better then , ¹⁰ you know?
2.	NS	Yeah . . . [laughs]

Just before the transition of the videoconferencing part of the task to the chat part, the NNS in Example 8 alludes to her previous nonunderstanding by asking his counterpart to type the jokes *so I can read slowly and maybe I get the jokes better then, you know?* As in Example 7, the NNS claimed understanding when the first jokes were conveyed. However, the NS does not react, nor does he attempt to go back to that part of the task; he only laughs in confirmation and leaves it at that.

EXAMPLE 9

Example 9—an instance of written chat—is perhaps the most convincing and interesting testimony of the influence of reflexive face-work during task-based language learning.

Written Chat, Dyad 6 (NS and NNS are Female)

Turn	Messenger	Chart Script and Observations
1.	NS	[10:46:04] Two Aussie cattle drivers . . . durin' the drought." [the joke is sent in one turn]
2.	NNS	[10:46:35] okay. :P ¹¹
3.		[NNS communicates joke to NS]
4.	NS	[10:52:08] haha i didnt really get that at all (worry-emoticon) haha
5.	NNS	[10:54:19] [sends off a long Dutch joke]
6.	NNS	[10:54:35] no tbh i didn't het yours either ¹² haha
7.	NNS	[10:55:02] but basically we like to make fun of other people, other countries
8.	NS	[10:55:03] hahaha i got the second joke!!! yaaay!!!
9.	NNS	[10:55:11] yaay!

In turn 2, the NNS sends a verbal and paralinguistic claim of understanding (cf. Koole, 2010) as the only response to the joke. Interestingly, it is not until the NS admits to not understanding the (translated) Dutch joke, which the NNS subsequently relates (turn 4), that the NNS admits to not having understood the previous Australian joke, *tbh*¹³ *I didn't het yours either* *haha* (turn 6). In other words, it is not until the relationship between the interactants changes from asymmetrical—the NNS is alone in her nonunderstanding—to egalitarian (Scollon & Scollon, 1995)—both NS and NNS fail to understand a joke—that the NNS feels confident enough to utter an overdue confession of nonunderstanding. However, as in Examples 7 and 8, this indicator of nonunderstanding does not lead to a resolution sequence. Part 2 of the task, then, remains unresolved despite the delayed NNS-disclosures of nonunderstanding. As such, the

nonoccurrence of negotiation of meaning is discursively constructed.

DISCUSSION

Since the data set we draw on in this study is limited, our conclusions must remain tentative. The study focused on the next turn behavior of the NNSs, right after the trigger had been communicated by the NS, and examined whether the response was mainly in the interest of the task, or more in the interest of face. Findings indicate that, in many cases, the NNSs did not initiate negotiation of meaning despite the fact that they knew that the task was an important component of the discussion that would follow and would feed into the script-writing part of the telecollaboration project. As a result, some parts of the task were not completed successfully.

When asked during the written post-task questionnaire “Did you at any time during the telecollaboration with your Australian counterpart just pretend to understand what s/he said? If so, why?”, many NNS students that replied in the affirmative implicitly referred to issues of face in their answers.¹⁴

Comment 1: “Yes. I don't know why. I think I just tried to be polite. I didn't know my counterpart. And I thought my counterpart would think I were stupid.”

Comment 2: “Yes, I did that a lot, only to be nice.”

Comment 3: “I laughed to make him feel comfortable.”

In other words, NNSs would not admit to nonunderstanding and, instead, claimed understanding. According to Goffman (1967), a person has two points of view: “a defensive orientation toward saving his own face” (p. 10) . . . “and a protective orientation toward saving the others' face” (p. 14). The NNSs in this study showed both as they refrained from indicating nonunderstanding; in turn, the NSs never confronted their counterparts, possibly because they were “disinclined to witness the defacement of others” (p. 10).

To illuminate further why the data show such a high percentage of nonoccurrence of negotiation of meaning, it is necessary to assess aspects of both the task itself and the context in which it was performed. Among possible reasons¹⁵ why the NNSs did not negotiate for meaning despite nonunderstanding, one might offer four different categories.

L2 Pedagogy-Related Nonoccurrence

Although the TBLT paradigm follows the premise that negotiation of meaning is beneficial to L2 learning, the learning context is specifically designed to resemble everyday conversational communication that differs from instructional contexts in that symmetrical speaker and hearer roles alternate and self-correction is preferred. When confronted with gaps in understanding, learners will therefore often pretend to understand, thereby manifesting a certain tolerance for uncertainty that is part of informal conversation (cf. Bannink, 2002; Eckert, 2009; Foster, 1998). SCMC complicates the social context even further: Students executing tasks in telecollaboration projects often literally move away from the classroom associated with institutional L2 learning due to time-zone difference and location-related issues. This physical distance from the traditional environment of school learning is likely to reinforce the paradox.

Task-Related Nonoccurrence

Telling a joke equals telling a story in the sense that it inhibits normal conversational turn taking (cf. Polanyi, 1982). It entails that the speaker embarks on an extended unit of talk: In principle there is no speaker change until the punchline has been delivered. The only contribution joke recipients are allowed to make are minimal responses, indicating that they track the joke and are lodged firmly in the listener role. In cases of nonunderstanding this constraint on interruption of the joke-telling turn creates a tension (cf. Schegloff, 2000) since in conversation any trouble—if indicated at all—should be reported as closely to the trouble spot as possible, that is, contingent to the trouble source. So the joke task—and with it all other tasks that produce story-type units of talk—gives rise to a second, closely related, paradox: Reporting trouble, and therefore initiating negotiation of meaning, is dispreferred both within and after the joke/story-telling unit. The fact that the study uncovered almost equal percentages of nonoccurrence of negotiation of meaning in both task environments indicates, however, that the relation between task design and (non)occurrence of negotiation of meaning deserves additional in-depth analysis (van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2016).

Medium-Related Nonoccurrence

The constraints on (the initiation of) repair described in the previous sections highlighted

aspects of face-to-face interactions. But medium-related factors appear to be at work as well. Recall that this study offers a cross-media comparative analysis with a counterbalanced design that used two types of technology-enhanced communication, face-to-face (videoconferencing) and written (chat). As indicated in Table 2, for both tasks, there were more instances of nonoccurrence of negotiation of meaning during the videoconferencing sessions than during the chat sessions. This suggests that participants found the initiation of negotiation of meaning easier in chat (cf. Freiermuth, 2011; van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2014), possibly due to the relative anonymity of a medium where the participants do not see or hear each other. Some NNS participants indicated post-task that they experienced the videoconferencing part of the task as “scarier” than the chat part of the task.

Participant-Related Nonoccurrence

Negotiation of meaning studies tend to focus on NNS–NNS dyads, either because there are no native speakers at hand, or because NNS–NNS dyads are deemed to be less concerned with issues of face (Varonis & Gass, 1985). Although this needs further investigation, advanced L2 speakers may be more embarrassed to admit nonunderstanding than elementary or intermediate learners, especially in NS–NNS discourse, since the relationship during this type of interaction is more egalitarian or symmetrical as compared with the hierarchical expert (NS) versus apprentice (NNS) relationship as is expected in elementary or intermediate L2 learning environments. Advanced adult L2 learners of English, such as the NNS participants in this study, tend to see themselves as being in a relatively equal linguistic position with native speakers of the target language. What is more, during the interaction, the Dutch students were repeatedly complimented on the level of their English by their NS counterparts (*Your English is better than mine!*), which may have elevated NNS nonunderstanding to be particularly disconcerting and face-threatening.

CONCLUSION

Among numerous conclusions of this study, the first is that L2 learners in SCMC environments are as hesitant to initiate negotiation of meaning as has been reported in nondigital classroom learner–learner face-to-face L2 exchanges. Analyses that disregard instances of (suspected)

TABLE 3
Negotiation of Meaning Research Paradigm

Understanding	Negotiation of Meaning	Successful Task Completion
+	–	+
–	+	+

nonoccurrence of negotiation of meaning—rather than considering all data—not only give too limited a view of L2 learner behavior in task-based environments but in fact run the risk of precipitating misleading conclusions regarding the propensity for learners to engage in negotiation of meaning inasmuch as they undervalue the social aspect of language use even in language learning settings. As Block (2003) concludes in his much-cited critique of SLA research, “SLA researchers systematically marginalise the social side of communication in their work,” a shortcoming that leads to a “mechanistic and instrumental view of conversational interaction” (p. 89).

As shown in Table 3, studies reporting high instances of negotiation of meaning suggest that the absence of indicators of nonunderstanding (–) is synonymous with understanding (+); conversely, they suggest that negotiation of meaning is initiated (+) in case of nonunderstanding (–). Both options would result in successful task completion. In other words, if there is *no* understanding, negotiation of meaning will be initiated, conducted, and concluded, ultimately leading to successful task completion. By comparison, if there is understanding to begin with, negotiation of meaning is not required for successful task completion.

However, as this study has established, its digital data evidence shows multiple instances that contradict these correlations, confirming findings from a number of earlier nondigital face-to-face learner–learner classroom interaction studies (Eckerth, 2009; Foster, 1998). Despite a near certainty of nonunderstanding (–), negotiation of meaning may not be initiated (–), thereby jeopardizing successful task completion (–) (see Table 4).

But there is a yet deeper conclusion to be contemplated: If we accept the assumption that language learners benefit from negotiation of meaning sequences in their L2 learning process, it is imperative that we include in our investigations interactions where negotiation of meaning does not occur. As van der Zwaard and Bannink (2014) note, if NSs and NNSs involved in task-based in-

TABLE 4
Negotiation of Meaning ‘Real World’ or Pragmatic Paradigm

Understanding	Negotiation of Meaning	Successful Task Completion
–	–	–

teraction go through a negotiation routine, this is no guarantee that common ground and understanding have in fact been accomplished. In the same way, not negotiating for meaning where and when it is called for and expected, does not automatically mean that mutual understanding has in fact been reached (cf. Eckerth, 2009; Foster, 1998; Willis, 1996). In fact, any nonoccurrences must be presumed to have a significantly negative effect on task completion, and ultimately on L2 learning.

As this study has illustrated, teachers and researchers alike must seriously consider the possibility that in the most authentic of L2 learning situations, such as genuine telecollaboration projects between NNSs and NSs of the target language, sociocultural factors like fear of losing face may hinder and jeopardize task performance. For TBLT-inspired research and pedagogies this may lead to the paradoxical situation that key desiderata and principles of TBLT may hamper rather than encourage the very negotiation of meaning it hopes to foster.

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NOTES

¹ Although task-based language teaching (TBLT) is generally regarded as inherent to a rejection of more traditional approaches of language teaching (Long, 1985; Skehan, 1998), Ellis (2003, 2009) contends that they are not mutually exclusive and that a language learning environment could be both meaning-focused and form-focused.

² Independently by two researchers.

³ Instances of NS modified input (comprehensible input; Long, 1981), mainly in their attempt to prevent NNS nonunderstanding.

⁴ Instances of NS modified input (comprehensible input; Long, 1981), mainly in their attempt to prevent NNS nonunderstanding, and NNS claims of understanding (as verified by the post-task).

⁵ During stimulated recall, the NNS admitted to not having had a clue about what the joke was about.

⁶ Between turns 11 and turn 40, the NNS communicates one of her Dutch jokes to the NS.

⁷ None of the chat scripts have been corrected for spelling or grammatical errors.

⁸ LOL = Laughing out loud

⁹ Our emphasis

¹⁰ Our emphasis

¹¹ Emoticon of someone sticking out their tongue

¹² Our emphasis

¹³ Tbh = to be honest

¹⁴ Ironically, even though the post-task questionnaire was anonymous, not all students admitted to having pretended understanding, possibly for the very reason of face.

¹⁵ These could simultaneously be regarded as the limitations of this study.

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