

An abstract of the thesis of Sharon S. Canada for the Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages presented June 4, 2004.

Title: Distance and Negotiation in the Low-Level ESL Classroom

In the adult ESL setting, students may bring vastly different educational experiences and cultural backgrounds to instructional activities. Such diversity can present obstacles to positive interaction between language learners. This study explores the impact of varying degrees of diversity on the success with which students negotiate their interactions during pair work in several low-level community college ESL classes.

A rating scale was used to assess the quality of negotiation in L2 dyadic interactions. The resulting scores were examined in relation to three aspects in which members of those dyads could differ: difference in first language, difference in first language education levels, and difference in second language proficiency. Those dyads whose partners spoke dissimilar first languages scored lower overall than those dyads whose partners spoke the same or related first language. Some statistical tests showed no significant correlation between differences in levels of first language education and negotiation scores, and no significant correlation between distance in second language proficiency and negotiation scores. However, other tests showed moderate positive correlation between distance in second language proficiency and negotiation scores when the effects of difference in first language are statistically controlled. Overall, the findings showed that most students could negotiate linguistic difficulties with each other in a neutral or positive manner. Sharing a common first language may enhance the quality of negotiation in instances where students vary in their second language proficiency.

Due to the varied ways in which a shared first language enhanced the language learning context of this study, it is recommended that teachers permit students who speak

the same first language to work together. Allowing students to select their own partners or to arrange seating so that students must physically move to join a partner also establishes the potential for a positive framework for the interaction.

Recommendations for further research of classroom interaction include refinement and use of the “quality of negotiation” rating scale developed for this study. More research is needed concerning the adult low-level ESL learner, including continued examination of how literacy students function in the classroom setting.