

A Note on the Concept of “Grounding” as it Relates to Other Similar Theories

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Abstract

Grounding (Clark and Schaefer, 1989) is the process by which people, in order to add to their pool of shared information, strive to gain confidence in mutual understanding by providing each other with positive evidence of understanding. It is one that has been suggested to be of use to English language teachers at Japanese elementary schools (see Nakashima & Hine, 2021) as well as junior high school (see Nakashima & Hine, 2022); however, it is not a concept that is widely talked about in the realm of EFL education. As such, in order to raise awareness of grounding, this paper aims to compare it to other more commonly discussed theories.

New English language curricula are being currently implemented at Japanese elementary schools and junior high schools, with elementary school teachers being encouraged to perform interactions with their classes in English (so called ‘small talk’), and junior high school English language teachers being directed to teach English language using English in order to maximise the students’ exposure to the language (Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2017). It is in this context that Nakashima & Hine (2021, 2022) suggested that the concept of ‘grounding’ (Clark and Schaefer, 1989) might prove to be an important concept for teachers working at Japanese elementary schools and junior high schools. However, the concept of grounding does not seem to have much of a presence in current EFL education literature, so this paper will have a brief look at how it relates to two other relevant and more well-known theories.

1. Grounding

All readers will have had the experience of meeting someone for the first time. The appearance/behaviour of the person may give you some clues as to their background; however, it is only until you start interacting with them that you can really start filling up the box of information about them. For a first-time meeting, this may include information regarding where they are from, what they do, what language(s) they speak, hobbies, etc. Also, because you are getting the information directly from that person, not only do you know what information is in the box, *so do they*. In fact, this box also contains the information about you that has come to light during the conversation. It is on the basis of this information that you are able to interact with one another. As you continue to interact, the two of you add more information to the box of shared information, and this helps you to build upon what has already gone before; after all, you do not want to continue, for any length of time, a conversation in which whatever you say is forgotten, gone for good, as soon as the words escape your lips. Ideally, everything discussed is kept

“on record” (Clark, 1996, p.54). Clark & Brennan (1991) call such a metaphorical box of shared information *common ground*, and define *grounding* as the process that people go through to add new information to it.

However, unfortunately, not all information gets added to common ground; it needs to have achieved the *grounding criterion*: “The contributor and the partners mutually believe that the partners have understood what the contributor meant to a criterion sufficient for current purposes” (Clark & Schaefer, 1989, p.262). That is to say, the people participating in the interaction need to be sufficiently confident that the information was relayed and understood accurately enough for current purposes, after which they will add it to the box of shared information for future reference.

Clark & Schaefer (1989) suggest that this adding of new information (grounding) takes place in the following two phases:

Presentation Phase: A presents utterance *u* for B to consider. He does so on the assumption that, if B gives evidence *e* or stronger, he can believe that B understands what A means by *u*.

Acceptance Phase: B accepts utterance *u* by giving evidence *e'* that he believes he understands what A means by *u*. He does so on the assumption that, once A registers evidence *e'*, he will also believe that B understands. (p.265)

In other words, person A says something to person B and, if the response of person B shows evidence of an adequate amount of understanding, person A will believe that person B understands.

Of course, though, the question is what counts as evidence of understanding, and Clark (1996) proposes four main types: *Assertions* of understanding, *Presuppositions* of understanding, *Displays* of understanding and *Exemplifications* of understanding. *Assertions* of understanding refer to utterances/actions that ‘assert’ understanding, such as saying “Yes”, “I understand.”, etc. *Presuppositions* of understanding refer to utterances/actions that ‘presuppose’ understanding, such as somebody dialing a phone number immediately after having been told it, without first checking to see if it was correct. *Displays* of understanding are utterances/actions that ‘display’ understanding, such as somebody dialing a phone number immediately after having been told it and the right person picking up. *Exemplifications* of understanding are utterances/actions that ‘exemplify’ understanding, and include verbatim repetition, paraphrasing, gestures, etc. For example, repeating a phone number that you have just been told back to the person who told you would constitute an exemplification of understanding.

As mentioned previously, there has yet to be much research regarding the effect of incorporating the concept of grounding into foreign language education; the concept simply does not seem to have much of presence in EFL literature. However, while the name of the concept may be unfamiliar, the ideas it contains may not be, as the following section regarding more well-known concepts will hopefully show.

2. Negotiation of Meaning

Negotiation of Meaning (NoM) is defined by Long (1996) as:

...the process in which, in an effort to communicate, learners and competent speakers provide and interpret signals for their own and their interlocutor’s perceived comprehension, thus provoking adjustments to linguistic form, conversational structure, message content, or all three, until an acceptable level of understanding is achieved. (p.418)

It is included in the updated version of the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) which suggests that “... *negotiation of meaning*, and especially negotiation work that triggers *interaction* adjustments by the NS or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways” (p.451-452). A slightly less wordy description of NoM comes courtesy of Pica (1996), who writes the following.

“Negotiation between learners and interlocutors take place during the course of their interaction when either one signals with questions or comments that the other’s preceding message has not been successfully conveyed. The other then responds, often by repeating or modifying the message. The modified version might take the form of a word or phrase extracted or segmented from the original utterance, a paraphrase, or a synonym substitution thereof.” (p.61)

In summary, negotiation is said to take place when there has been some sort of perceived breakdown in communication that tends to force people to increase their effort in trying to understand and/or trying to be understood; moreover, this process is thought to promote language acquisition.

2.1 Research into NoM in the realm of EFL/ESL

There has been various research conducted into the field of NoM in EFL, although most seems to have traditionally focused on interactions between native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS). However, there is some research that focused on NNS-NNS interactions, such as the following.

Yusrizal (2001) conducted research on forty students attending the University of Lampung Indonesia, in an effort to find out whether Indonesian EFL learners negotiate meaning with each other in English when given the opportunity; the primary result being that they would. However, it seems there were differences in amount of negotiation performed depending on type of activity; information gap tasks produced more negotiation than did, for example, jigsaw activities. Yusrizal also observed that familiarity among interlocutors also seemed to effect amount of interaction and therefore also negotiation.

Samani, et al.(2015) conducted research on fourteen students learning English as a second language at Universiti Putra Malaysia, in order to find out what forms of negotiation are performed at what frequency between ESL students in a text-based synchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC). The result was that the students negotiated an average of 2.10 per 100 words, and the most frequently used functions were confirmation, elaboration, and elaboration requests.

2.2 How NoM fits into the concept of grounding

As previously mentioned, grounding is the process whereby people add to their common ground information in that they believe all relevant parties have sufficiently understood. However, of course, sometimes people do not understand even if they think that they have, and actually provide evidence of *misunderstanding*, that is, evidence that shows they have not, in fact, understood. It is this situation where NoM seems to come into play.

Again, grounding is the process of achieving/maintaining sufficient confidence in mutual understanding, which can ultimately only be done by providing positive evidence of understanding. On the other hand, from the literature referenced in 2, NoM seems to focus on the specific act of *reclaiming* confidence in mutual understanding when one or both parties have *insufficient confidence* in mutual understanding. As such, while NoM is separated from grounding in that the two theories do not seem to appear together in the world of academia, at heart it is not necessarily a completely different theory; on the contrary, NoM could perhaps be considered to part of the process of grounding. In fact, Long (1996) brushes against the theory of grounding in a way when talking about possible confusion between negative and positive evidence of understanding in the following passage.

...much negative evidence takes the form of partial repetitions, and such repetitions also serve as expressions of agreement, confirmations that a message has been understood, and other functions in the same conversation. The fact that an utterance is intended as a correction, therefore, does not necessarily mean that a learner will perceive it that way. (p.432)

Of course, what constitutes NoM is not completely set in stone and, at least in its traditional state, would surely not be considered the last word on interaction; after all, there is always more to consider when it comes to any theory. In the case of a traditional definition of NoM, perhaps it is appropriate to quote Clark & Brennan (1991) who say "...if negative evidence is all we looked for, we would often accept information we had little justification for accepting ... people ultimately seek *positive evidence* of understanding (p.131)." In fact, there are researchers who have called for a revised and expanded view of NoM, such as Bennett (2002) who comments on the issue in the following passage.

Therefore, rather than viewing negotiation of meaning as a series of individual strategies that are useful in learning a language primarily because they may be useful in encouraging comprehensible and output and repairing breakdowns in coherence, and where each exchange in itself is a "negotiation", there is grounds for broadening the definition of negotiation of meaning to relate to the ongoing process that takes place when people work together to understand one another. In fact, the word "negotiation" suggests a much more active and shared relationship between speakers than has been assigned to them in the traditional negotiation of meaning research... (p.62)

This broader view of negotiation of meaning is much closer to grounding as Clark describes it. In fact, the phrase 'when people work together to understand one another' seems to echo Clark, who describes language use as a *joint action*, or "...one that is carried out by an ensemble of people acting in co-ordination with each other" (1996, p.3). In fact, in 2, Long(1996) is quoted as saying that NoM is performed "...until an acceptable level of understanding is achieved (p.418)." Of course, it hardly needs pointing out that Long's 'achieving an acceptable level of understanding' seems very similar to Clark's 'achieving sufficient confidence in mutual understanding for current purposes'.

In conclusion, NoM, in its traditional sense, seems to describe, in detail, a specific part of the concept of grounding. A potentially expanded NoM, however, may well come very closer to the current definition of grounding.

3. The MERRIER Approach

MERRIER is a seven-pronged approach designed for English language teachers to employ in order to increase the intelligibility of their speech. It was proposed by Watanabe (1995) and consists of Miming (or Models), Examples, Redundancy, Repetition, Interaction, Expansion, and Rewarding. The following is paraphrased from Watanabe (1995, p. 189-193) with added examples.

Miming (or Models) refers to the use of visual aids to understanding in order to bolster the intelligibility of the teacher's verbal communication. It includes non-verbal parts of language such as facial expression and gesture; furthermore, it also includes other similar visual aids to understanding such as flashcards, video, etc. Of course, while it may not specifically say so in the original paper, it seems reasonable to also include oral aids to understanding such as animal noises, background music, special effects, etc.

Examples refers to the use of specific and/or more detailed examples to describe a relatively complicated concept(s). For example, after saying the word "Oceania", a teacher could then provide the names of countries that exist in the continent of Oceania, which may help listeners understand the concept of Oceania even if they are not completely familiar with its English language label. In that sense, it may simply provide more clues that can help the listener locate the concept that they are already familiar with in their L1; however, it may also serve to help people understand what may be covered under the umbrella of a particular term/phrase.

Redundancy refers to the use of different phrasing in order to convey the same meaning. For example, after saying "Please turn to page 46" you could follow up with "Please open your books to page

46” in order to increase the possibility you will be understood.

Repetition refers to the multiple use of a particular phrase that is deemed important in order to make it more salient. For example, a teacher may explain instructions in regard to the flow of an activity and, at the end, repeat the steps. The increase in saliency is achieved by simply increasing the amount of exposure that students have to the words/phrases.

Interaction refers to a more two-way interaction between teachers and students. For example, a teacher could ask students questions, give directions, or in some other way invite the students to react to what the teacher is saying. As the students are participating in a more significant way, it arguably results in the students being more engaged and, more importantly, gives students opportunity to show understanding. It also gives the teacher a chance to gauge student understanding and, if necessary, employ more methods to increase intelligibility.

Expansion refers to the way a teacher can incorporate and expand upon what a student provides in response to the teacher.

Rewarding refers to how a teacher can compliment student response.

3.1 Research Into Effectiveness of MERRIER in the Realm of EFL

There has been more interest in the application of MERRIER of late, possibly encouraged by the inclusion in the latest junior high school curriculum of a section that stipulates that English language classes should be conducted in English in order to maximize student exposure to the target language. At Japanese elementary schools, teachers are also being encouraged to include “small talk” in their classes, which refers to short interactions between teacher and class, performed in English. In 2020, a small team of researchers analyzed the sample scripts provided to elementary school teachers by MEXT through the lens of the MERRIER approach, as part of an effort to find a way to help teachers interact with their students in easily understood English (Wada, Sakai, et al, 2020). In the paper, the original seven aspects of MERRIER were expanded upon to give a total of 16 sub-categories, which can be seen in table 1 below.

Category	Sub Category	Definition
<u>M</u> odel/Mime	1. Model 2. Non-Linguistic Clues	1. Show an example of 2. Use non-verbal information
<u>E</u> xample	1. Concrete 2. Abstract	1. Give detailed examples 2. Abstraction
<u>R</u> edundancy	1. Conceptual 2. Grammatical	1. Paraphrase (conceptually) 2. Paraphrase (grammatically)
<u>R</u> epetition	1. Repetition_Exact 2. Repetition_Additive 3. Repetition_Partial	1. Repeat exactly what was said. 2. Repeat what was said but also add to it. 3. Repeat only part of what was said.
<u>I</u> nteraction	1. Display Question 2. Referential Question	1. Asking a question you know the answer to. 2. Asking a question you don't know the answer to.
<u>E</u> xpansion	1. Recast_Exact 2. Recast_Additive 3. Recast_Partial	1. Recast all of what was said. 2. Recast all of what was said but also add to it. 3. Recast part of what was said.
<u>R</u> eward	1. Reward 2. Negative Reaction	1. Praise if appropriate understanding is shown. 2. Correct if misunderstanding occurs.

Table 1: MERRIER sub-categories, as adapted from Wada, Sakai, et al. (2020, p.292)

In their analysis, Wada, Sakai et al. found that Interaction featured most frequently in the sample small talk scripts, followed by Model/Mime, Interaction/Example, Example, Reward, Redundancy, Repetition and Expansion. As for recommendations, they mention ① Teachers using Referential Questions so that more meaningful communication is possible, ② Providing concrete examples after asking questions, rephrasing, and repeating important phrases in order to aid student understanding, and ③ Recasting in order to convey more correct/suitable phrasing to the students (p.301).

Ouchi (2020) also conducted research on 40 university students in order to see if training in the MERRIER approach would help reduce teacher foreign language anxiety (TFLA). Ouchi divided the participants into two groups and performed three 90 minute MERRIER approach workshops with the experimental group. All of the participants then filled out pre-post surveys, with part of the survey using the Teacher Foreign Language Anxiety Scale: TFLAS (Horwitz, 2013), and another part using an original self evaluation method in order to gauge what Ouchi calls “Teacher English Language Ability” (p.129). The result of this research was that the experimental group, which received instruction in the MERRIER approach, showed increased levels of self-evaluated Teacher English Language Ability and reduced levels of TFLA. The control group, on the other hand, showed decreased levels of self-evaluated Teacher English Language Ability and increased levels of TFLA.

Of course, there needs to be more research conducted on not just university students but current elementary school teachers; however, the results of what research has been done indicates that there does seem to be some potential in the application of MERRIER approach in the English language classroom.

3.2 How the MERRIER Approach Fits Into the Concept of Grounding

It seems that, like NoM, MERRIER also contributes to the process of grounding. Grounding refers to the act of adding to common ground information that all parties are sufficiently confident has been mutually understood; the MERRIER approach, by increasing intelligibility of the message, seems to have the object of helping people become confident in mutual understanding.

However, what is especially interesting is how MERRIER seems to mirror what is described in grounding. It seems that the methods that Watanabe, via MERRIER, proposes that teachers use in order to make teacher-talk more intelligible correlate to the ways Clark, via the concept of grounding, proposes that people provide positive evidence of understanding.

For example, Model/Mime talks about using gestures, and Clark(1996) talks about the use of *iconic gestures*, which seem to come under the heading of exemplifications of understanding. Flashcards do not seem to be specifically mentioned by Clark(1996), but as they directly refer to a certain concept, they probably constitute what Clark calls *icons* and can surely also be referred to as exemplifications of understanding when being shown or indicated.

Examples, as mentioned by MERRIER, would come under the heading of displays of understanding if performed by another interlocutor in response to something they were told.

Redundancy as mentioned by MERRIER correlates to paraphrasing, included in exemplifications of understanding by Clark.

Repetition is also included in exemplifications of understanding.

Interaction as described by MERRIER, while not specifically mentioned in the main concept of grounding, could nonetheless be considered part of the whole picture due to the fact that it allows people the *opportunity* to show positive evidence of understanding.

Expansion refers to displays of understanding on the part of the teacher in response to student output.

Reward may not be specifically referred to by Clark; however, it may come under the heading of an assertion of understanding.

The significance of the similarity of MERRIER output and showing positive evidence of understanding as described by grounding is, perhaps, not something to be surprised about; after all, they

are two sides of the same coin. Showing positive evidence of understanding is about the listener providing signposts that can be seen to be linked, in some way, to what the other party was trying to convey. The majority of the MERRIER approach is about providing the same sort of signposts, almost preemptively, *from the speaker’s perspective*. Of course, though, the difference lies in the objective. Showing positive evidence of understanding, as described in grounding, has the objective of achieving sufficient confidence in mutual understanding; MERRIER has the objective of increasing intelligibility of speech in order to make it *easier* for the other party to show positive evidence of understanding.

4. Conclusion

There seems to be more of a spotlight on student-student interaction in foreign language education than was previously the case and, in such a context, it is natural for language teachers to focus on the need to improve the ability of students to output easily-comprehensible language and work together with their classmates to achieve confidence in mutual understanding. The theories discussed in this paper may deal with different pieces of that particular puzzle; however, they seem to compliment rather than contradict one another. As such, as research into these separate areas continues, perhaps we should also start thinking about how to consolidate them in order to create a theory that is greater than the simple sum of its parts.

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