Effects of a Debate Task on Changes of Communication Variables

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Abstract

In the current Japanese EFL context, the promotion of communicative competence has been highly recommended, and hence the importance of task based language teaching or the use of output activities is focused heavily on due to its possibility to enhance not only language proficiency and use but also learners’ motivation to learn English and willingness to communicate. However, there has been not so much research investigating the effects of open tasks on the development of communication variables. This study attempts to reveal whether or not learners’ communication variables would change through a seven-week long debate project. The results indicated that from a global perspective learners’ trait and state willingness to communicate and communication apprehension did not significantly vary whereas their trait and state perceived communication competence significantly developed. This study also discovered that from an individual perspective the debate was more effective for those who were less oriented toward communication. It ends with some pedagogical and future implications.

1. Introduction

When we focus on the goals of successful language learning, we can come up with two main goals. The first goal is to produce autonomous language learners who can appropriately use various strategies and can concentrate on learning without any push or pressure from others. The second goal is to train autonomous language users who can actively look for opportunities to communicate with others in the target language and can be actually engaged in communication. As for this second goal, learners’ willingness to communicate (i.e., volition to initiate communication) plays a crucially important role (MacIntyre, 2007; MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998). Willingness to communicate is deeply associated with communication apprehension and perceived communication competence, and if these three communication variables are positively influenced by classroom practices, we as educators can help learners become autonomous language users. Our attention is also paid to the use of a debate task since
some researchers have advocated the effectiveness of task based language teaching (e.g., Izumi, 2009) on the development of linguistic proficiency and language use. Hence, the purpose of the present study is to investigate how learners’ communication variables change during a seven-week-long debate task.

2. Previous Studies and Purposes of the Study

One big difference between language learning and learning other subjects such as math and science is that the educational goal of language learning includes helping learners become autonomous language learners and at the same time become autonomous language users (Little, 1995). In the 1990s, many researchers paid primary attention to autonomous language learners through the concept of self-instruction or learner training (e.g., Victoria & Lockhart, 1995; White, 1995). However, after communicative approach spread to various countries, the attention seemed to be shifted to autonomous language users (Gremmo & Riley, 1995). It is because learners have to actually use the target language to communicate so that they can successfully gain communicative competence (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). The notion of willingness to communicate (WTC), which can be defined as one’s volition to initiate communication, is probably useful to consider language users (e.g., Maclntyre, 2007).

In the field of second/foreign language acquisition, WTC is deeply discussed by MacIntyre and his colleagues. MacIntyre et al. (1998), for instance, presented a pyramid model of variables that influence WTC. This model suggests that WTC, which is the prerequisite for language use, is directly predicted by communication confidence (i.e., the presence of perceived communication competence (PCC) and the lack of communication apprehension (CA)); the higher communication confidence learners possess, the more likely they are to initiate communication. With whom learners communicate is also an important factor, and MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, and Conrod (2001) reported that when learners talked to their friends in French, their level of CA decreased and that of PCC increased. Various other factors such as gender, age (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2002), and international posture (Yashima, 2002; Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide, 2008) are investigated in relation to WTC, but the number of studies focusing on classroom contexts is still limited. Koga (2010) claimed that learners’ WTC, CA, and PCC can be positively developed in classroom settings where cooperative and communicative work was emphasized. Taking into account the current educational policy, teaching English in English, Sato and Koga (2012) discovered that WTC increased in an almost-all-English-classroom-environment probably because a teacher can work as a good model of a language user whom learners would like to become in future. Although Koga placed his emphasis on cooperative and communicative work, it is still unknown what kinds of tasks or activities had a great impact on the development of the three variables.

In the recent Japanese EFL setting, task based language teaching (TBLT) has flourished.
However, there is a conflict between those who support TBLT and those who argue for the use of more closed tasks and the Japanese traditional or modified presentation-practice-production approach. Sato (2005) compared the effectiveness of a closed task with that of an open task in acquiring the structure of the subjunctive past. The results of pre and post tests revealed that the closed task was more effective than the open task in acquiring the structure. However, the analysis of students' tape-recorded utterances revealed that they were more communicative in the open task. Although students in the study made many mistakes and errors in the open task without using the target structure, they were trying harder to communicate with their partners and were making efforts to exchange their information and ideas by asking and answering questions. While students were pushed to use the target structures in the closed task, in the open task they were pushed or encouraged to communicate. Referring to his study, this present study would suggest that open tasks have a high probability to strengthen learners' communication variables. Yashima (2009) and Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008) implied the effectiveness of debate tasks (i.e., an open task, Ellis, 2003) in which global issues and human rights were taken up as a topic for learners to discuss and suggested that dealing with such a “cognitively and emotionally involving content” (Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide, p. 570), students become more willing to communicate properly and fluently. These studies provide some advantages of the debate as an open task, but still not so many empirical studies have been conducted. Besides, because the debate task is employed in English classrooms, it is natural to think that learners' classroom-specific state communication variables (i.e., more flexible and dynamic) are more likely to be activated than general trait communication variables (i.e., more rigid and stable) (e.g., Gardner & Tremblay, 1998; Tremblay, Goldberg, & Gardner, 1995). The purposes of this study, therefore, are to investigate the following three research questions (RQs).

**RQ1:** How do learners' trait communication variables change through the seven-week-long debate task?

**RQ2:** How do learners' classroom-specific state communication variables change through the seven-week-long debate task?

**RQ3:** What kinds of groups of learners show the variations of communication variables?

### 3. Method

A total of 121 university students, ranging from the first year to the fourth year, participated in the study. They majored in a variety of fields such as biology, economics, business, and engineering. By referring to the test results reported by a university, we would categorize the learners as pre-intermediate to intermediate because their results were equivalent at least to the STEP pre-second. Before the experiment, the consensus to participate in the study was made, and at that time, some students were unwilling to join it. Consequently the final number of available
data became 69.

As for the materials, in order to measure learners' three communication variables (i.e., WTC, CA, and PCC), the questionnaire created by Yashima (2009) was adopted. WTC was evaluated by her questionnaire, and CA and PCC were measured by the modified version of it. The questionnaire includes a total of eight items that ask learners how willing, anxious, and competent they are in communicating with others in various contexts (e.g., an English classroom context and a more neutral setting), with the range from one (e.g., absolutely willing or competent) to six (e.g., absolutely not willing or competent). The example of the questionnaires is presented in Appendix.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Procedures of the Debate Project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th week</td>
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<tr>
<td>5th week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th week</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The study was conducted in eight English classes, which dealt mainly with reading. The classes started from September in 2011 and ended in January in 2012 (the total of 15 classes), and each lesson, which was conducted by the Japanese teacher (one of the researchers in this study), lasted 90 minutes through mostly Japanese instructions. Since the classes focused on reading, learners were most of the time required to read a textbook and translate or summarize passages, although some communicative and group work was introduced. The debate project started from the 7th week, and the procedures are provided in Table 1. As can be noticed, one big difference between this debate task and a standard debate is that learners needed to memorize the first half of their English manuscript that were grammatically corrected by the teacher (see 6th week). In both debate settings, we can prepare for a manuscript when we state our arguments, but on the other hand, when we rebut opponents’ opinions or give counterexamples, we spontaneously prepare for our speech. The teacher originally did not expect the students to learn the manuscript by heart, but some of them insisted that they would memorize the sentences which were even ill formed. Pedagogically speaking, it is certain that memorizing correct English sentences in the preplanned manuscript is much more suitable than incorrect sentences, so this adjustment was made. However, it must be clearly stated that learners had opportunities to freely choose or use whatever
grammatical structures they would like to use in counterarguments, and thus the task itself was an open task. Furthermore, after all of the debaters finished their roles, the extra time was provided for them to freely discuss the topic. In the debate task, each student had a total of two to three minutes to discuss their topics. This time allotment was decided based on learners' proficiency; learners in advanced classes had three minutes while those in beginning classes had two minutes. The actual procedure of the debate task is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Procedures of the Debate Task

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>debater</th>
<th>pro</th>
<th>con</th>
<th>time allotment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>give an introduction of the topic and state his argument</td>
<td>give an introduction of the topic and state his argument</td>
<td>two to three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>rebut the 1st con and then state her argument</td>
<td>rebut the 1st or 2nd pro and then state her argument</td>
<td>two to three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>rebut the 1st or 2nd con and then state his argument</td>
<td>rebut the 1st, 2nd, or 3rd pro and then state his argument</td>
<td>two to three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>rebut the 1st, 2nd, or 3rd con and then state her argument and conclusion</td>
<td>rebut the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th pro and then state her argument and conclusion</td>
<td>two to three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>all</td>
<td>free discussion</td>
<td>free discussion</td>
<td>two to three</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As for the research procedures, the questionnaire was first administered before the debate task. At that time, a consensus was made; if students were unwilling to participate in the research, they were able to return the anonymous questionnaire, and the results of the questionnaire had no influence on their final grades. After the debate task, the same questionnaire was again administered.

Before the following analyses, data were first reversely coded; the higher scores of WTC and PCC mean that learners are more willing and competent to communicate, whereas the lower scores of CA mean that learners are less anxious about communication. The data of both trait and state communication variables were analyzed by using paired-sample t-tests, together with the calculation of effect sizes (i.e., a point-biserial correlation coefficient, $r$). It must be noted that the aggregations of eight items in each three communication variables were treated as trait because the items were related to various situations where learners use English, whereas the aggregations of items 3, 5, and 7 were regarded as state because the three items are related specifically to English classroom settings (see Appendix). To examine RQ3, a cluster analysis with the squared Euclidean by means of the Ward method was first used to divide learners into groups, followed by a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to validate the grouping. After this classification,
t-tests were again used to identify which group tended to demonstrate the variations in the communication variables.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of t-tests examining the variations of the three communication variables between before and after the debate task showed that in a trait level (answers to RQ1), only PCC significantly increased with the large effect, but WTC and CA showed a stabilizing tendency with the small effect sizes (see Table 3). Similarly, in a state level (answers to RQ2), PCC developed significantly, but WTC did not show a significant change (see Table 3). However, this analysis suggests that learners’ CA in a classroom context tended to decrease with the small effect size (r = .23). It is observed from the descriptive statistics that the learners in this study did not have high PCC as some other studies also presented (e.g., Koga, 2010; Sato & Koga, 2012). These results implied that Japanese EFL learners generally feel less competent in speaking English, but after having a debate activity, they can enhance their PCC significantly.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics and Results of T-Tests in Trait and State Levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>type</th>
<th>Before the debate</th>
<th>After the debate</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>Mdiff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Full M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WTC</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>27.84</td>
<td>7.55</td>
<td>29.10</td>
<td>-1.428</td>
<td>.158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trait</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>35.94</td>
<td>7.36</td>
<td>34.84</td>
<td>7.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCC</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>19.46</td>
<td>7.42</td>
<td>23.32</td>
<td>7.77</td>
<td>-4.856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WTC</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10.78</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>11.28</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>state</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13.93</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>13.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PCC</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7.10</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>8.72</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. r = .10 refers to a small effect, r = .30 to a medium effect, and r = .50 to a large effect (Field, 2005, p. 32).

Three distinct groups were observed in the cluster analysis, and the following MANOVA suggested the validity of the grouping (see Table 4). The first cluster demonstrated moderate levels of the three communication variables, whereas the second cluster was not highly oriented toward communication. It was the third cluster that showed the ideal tendencies of the variables. The results of t-tests (answers to RQ3) revealed that the debate had a positive effect on the variations of WTC, CA and PCC of the second cluster (see Table 5); WTC and PCC significantly developed and CA significantly decreased. It had also a restricted impact on the first cluster because of the development of PCC. However, the third cluster did not take advantage of the debate activity since their levels of the communicative variables did not show any significant changes.
Izumi (2009) states that tasks that require learners to do pair or group work and presentations are satisfying to students. He also puts an emphasis on the importance of a content-based task that requires students to think by themselves to analyze data rather than just giving lectures. He argues that this kind of task can increase students’ participation and sense of achievement. In the debate activity of the present study, students, focusing more on the contents, were encouraged to work with other students and think logically by themselves. In other words, they were demanded to communicate with others to perform the debate, and actually they did it. It
is interpreted that the nature of the task contributed to the significant increase of PCC. They succeeded in discussing the topics in English, which in turn led them to feel sense of achievement and PCC.

To account for the reason why WTC did not show a significant increase, we can refer to Sato and Koga (2012), which revealed that when a teacher conducted the class in almost all English, providing a great amount of high quality of English input to students, their WTC increased significantly with a large effect size. By introducing the notion of the possible self, defined as “Possible selves are the ideal selves that we would very much like to become” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954), they explained that learners in their research saw the teacher successfully using English and might have thought that they would like to become a person who was able to speak English well. They also interpreted that as English was the official language in the class, it was natural for the students to speak English, not Japanese. In the present study, however, the teacher did not provide a lot of oral English input to students; he conducted the lessons mainly in Japanese and allowed students to use Japanese in preparing for the debate activity. It can be assumed that this input (and output) scarce environment resulted in no significant increase of their WTC in English.

Students’ CA did not change through the lessons; it remained high. This is compatible with Sato and Koga (2012), and we can refer to their argument that Japanese EFL learners, who are generally regarded as learners with a relatively low level of proficiency, would have felt anxiety due to their limited English skills. In addition, in the present study, students’ main focus was placed not on language but on the contents, and they did not have enough practice of the forms before debating. It is crucial for Japanese learners to have enough practice such as imitation, repetition, and pattern practice before using English for real communication (e.g., Sato, 2009; Miyasako, 2012; Yamaoka, 2005, 2006). However, since students in the present study were not engaged in form focused practice, they communicated with others with high CA in the debate.

One interesting result is that the changes of the trait levels of the three variables are almost identical to those of the state levels. It was first assumed that the state levels would vary more significantly because in classroom learners are by and large acquainted with each other, have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom, and thus are more likely to communicate with their peers in English with high WTC and PCC and low CA. Based on the results, however, this study implies that we may not need to make a trait and state distinction of these three variables. MacIntyre et al. (2001) also showed a similar result that WTC inside the classroom was highly correlated with WTC outside the classroom. To support this implication, correlation analyses were conducted between WTC, PCC, and CA inside (i.e., items 3, 5, and 7) and outside the classroom (items 1, 2, 4, 6, and 8), and the results indicated high correlations (e.g., among six correlations, the lowest was \( r = .607 \) between inside and outside WTC in the second questionnaire, and the highest was \( r = .892 \) between PCCs in both the first and the second questionnaire). Taking these correlation analyses into consideration, this present study suggests
that it may be difficult to make a distinction between trait and state WTC, PCC, and CA.

From a global perspective, the debate activity seems to be less effective because only PCC ideally developed. It was inferred from an individual perspective, however, that those who are not oriented toward communication can take advantage of the debate activity (i.e., cluster 2). This is probably because they accumulated good experiences of using English and sense of accomplishment through the activity, and consequently became more willing to use it with competence. Although the number of learners in this group was comparatively small \((n=17)\), the effect sizes specified strong changes of the communication variables. By contrast, for those who are well motivated to communicate in English, this kind of controlled debate activity may not be beneficial. As mentioned in the previous section, this debate activity, on the one hand, is open in that learners can use whatever grammatical and lexical forms they choose to successfully complete the activity, but on the other hand is controlled because learners were first engaged in the activity in Japanese and were required to memorize the first part of the pre-determined manuscripts. It is presumed that learners with high willingness to communicate and possibly high language proficiency may hope to have more authentic tasks in which they can practice spontaneous speech in a real communication context.

Finally, we noticed that almost all of the learners did not take advantage of the debate task in terms of the development of language use. That is, even though they had opportunities to freely argue for or against opinions raised in the debate, they mostly and simply read the preplanned manuscripts about their own discussion. As mentioned above, since learners were anxious about their proficiency and focused a lot on conveying the contents of the topic, they apparently failed to make the most of their opportunities to interact with each other through the open debate task. Furthermore, in spite of the presentation of some target structures that could be used in the debate, the learners rarely used such structures, although we did not actually count the number of them appearing in their speech. To summarize, a debate task has a positive effect only on the development of PCC, but may have a restricted influence on WTC, CA, and possibly language use, although it has a positive impact on learners with lower levels of communication variables.

5. Limitations and Conclusion

Before making concluding remarks, we need to point out two limitations related to this current study. First, although we originally had a relatively sufficient number of participants (121 students in total), due to some practical reasons the available data became 69, which is too small to generalize or observe overall behaviors of Japanese EFL learners. Second, we did not evaluate the development of learners’ linguistic proficiency as well as language use. We, based on the our observation and impression, made some implications about the relationships among the three communication variables, the nature of the debate task, and linguistic skills, but it is certain that more systematic ways of examining the relationships are indispensable.
Despite the limitations, this study demonstrated intriguing results: (a) both trait and state levels of PCC can be positively influenced by communication work such as a debate task in which learners can actually use English, (b) output activities may not be sufficient to increase trait and state WTC, but high quality of English input from teachers may be also necessary, (c) using output activities and providing English input are not sufficient to reduce trait and state CA, but one assumption was made that activities that help learners directly develop proficiency may be required to diminish CA although it must be supported by empirical research in future, (d) based on the t-tests and the correlation analyses, WTC, PCC, and CA may not be distinguished between the trait and the state, (e) the debate activity was more beneficial to those who were less oriented toward communication, and (f) observing learners’ performance, it may be implied that the development of the language use cannot be fully guaranteed through the debate activity.

As for the practical implications, in a debate activity, as learners are given the freedom to decide which grammatical structures to use, it may be unlikely that they will produce the target structures in the task. Because most of Japanese learners have exposure to English only in an English class, they are highly demanded to learn accurate use of new structures, words, and expressions during the class. In other words, a debate activity may not meet this demand. Ellis (2003) has admitted that students often regard communicative open tasks as opportunities for communication rather than for learning. If we draw on Bruton’s (2005) conclusion that a task has limited applicability for EFL students, we can be skeptical of the appropriateness of a debate activity for Japanese students in improving their English proficiency. However, if a debate activity can encourage students to have more communication even with some mistakes or errors, and if the task can provide the opportunities to improve something beyond linguistic aspects of English such as PCC, logical thinking, reasoning, creativity, and imagination, we can certainly employ the task according to the purpose of the classes. Research on dynamicity of WTC, CA, and PCC in relation to communicative open tasks is still a new field, and hence in future we are strongly demanded to gather as much information as possible so as to maximize language learning and use, which in turn allows us to meet the goal of language learning that is to produce autonomous language users.

References


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**Appendix**

*Example of the Questionnaire Measuring Willingness to Communicate*

以下 8 つの状況下で、自分がどれだけ *英語* で話す *意欲* が強いかを選んでください

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. 大勢の前でスピーチをする機会があるとき</th>
<th>2. 列に並んでて知り合いが前にいたとき</th>
<th>3. 英語の授業中のグループディスカッションのとき</th>
<th>4. 初めて会う人のグループで話す機会があったとき</th>
<th>5. 英語の授業中に自由に発言する機会があるとき</th>
<th>6. 列にならんでて友達が前にいたとき</th>
<th>7. 英語のクラスで前に出て話す機会があるとき</th>
<th>8. 友人のグループで議論するとき</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>常に話す</td>
<td>たいてい話す</td>
<td>ときどき話す</td>
<td>あまり話さない</td>
<td>めったに話さない</td>
<td>決して話さない</td>
<td>常に話す</td>
<td>たいてい話す</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1 2 3 4 5 6)

(Yashima, 2009)