Task-based Language Learning through Debate

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Learners' language production in task-based learning through debate in a high school English classroom is closely examined. Seeing a significant improvement in the students' language development in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity of language after a number of debate tasks, this paper goes on to explore in transcript data of one debate task how learners developed their oral competence. Crucial factors to push learners to make maximum use of their target language are noted. A learning stage, which I characterize as "the chaotic period", in which learners produce more pauses and self-initiated attempts at clarification caused by learners pushing themselves to paraphrase and improvise their speech, seems to play an important role in language development. Reasoning skills and learners' collaboration are also observed as important factors.

1. Introduction
This paper is a practitioner's classroom research (see Allwright, 2005a), which is an observation of actual classroom activities based on a task-based syllabus to develop learners' oral competence, but not activities specifically designed for empirical research to find their effect on learners and it is also based on a teacher's perspective, not a typical researcher's.

Communicative approaches have been in the mainstream for second language pedagogy since the 1980s. Especially tasks hold a central place. Bygate et al. (2001) suggest the following definition of a task: "A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective" (p. 11). Task-based learning is considered to be learners acquiring language skills by using the language in the process of task completion. The environment in high schools in Japan in general, however, is still far behind the development in the field of second language teaching, i.e., language teaching is still mainly focused on "knowing that". "Knowing how" is a requisite to be able to use the language (Johnson, 1996). The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been encouraging language teachers to promote their pedagogical skills with the support of several English language education reforms.

In the middle of English language education reforms I taught elective "Oral Communication" at high school for five years in total from 1999 to 2004. I designed these classes for task-based learning with the goal that students would be able to orally express their idea logically, using debates at the main stage of the course. Classes were taught totally
in English.

This paper examines my year-project of Oral Communication class by task-based learning through debate and looks for possible key elements of learner development.

2. Literature Review

Language acquisition through interaction has been studied in the field of language teaching these two decades. Most task-based research to date has focused on forms and structures of language in its use, even though tasks themselves are meaning-focused activities. Learners who can manage to deal with real situations skillfully using communication strategies might happen to be evaluated lowly because they have little need to attend to new forms in the input (Schmidt, 1983). What is the purpose of language learning? One goal of language learning could be to gain the kind of skills that are required in social situations, such as reasoning, negotiation, persuasion, and so on, besides just sharing information with accurate forms. Then how can these reasoning skills be developed?

2.1. Some Perspectives on Tasks and Language Learning

The open/closed distinction is one dimension mentioned in this research area. Long (1989, referred to in Ellis, 2003) evaluates closed tasks higher than open-ended tasks due to its promotion of negotiation work. On the other hand, Duff (1986) investigated the potentially differential role of task types in the SLA process and she (1993) also examined how open-ended tasks influence the production of oral interlanguage (IL) structures by learners' production such as number of words, turns, and c-units, which shows a different perspective from that of negotiation of meanings. The value of each task type seems to totally change by which factors we measure a learner's production with, e.g., with amount of negotiation of meaning (Long, 1983) or with amount of constituents such as words (Tong-Fredericks, 1984), c-units (Loban, 1963; Duff, 1986, 1993) or t-units (Bygate, 2001), and subordination (Skehan, 2001), or with the amount of self-initiated clarification attempts (Shehadeh, 1999), just as Fanslow (1977) describes teachers' teaching behavior with no criteria for pedagogical purposes, comparing to Rashomon, where four people give all different interpretations witnessing the same event.

Another perspective of task types is seen in a study by Bygate (2001) that investigated the effects of the repetition of the tasks. The study shows that the repetition of performance produced greater fluency and complexity, although it doesn't provide any statistical evidence of the effect of the repetition of the same task type on learners' language production.

There are also several researchers who approach interactive language teaching from a social point of view. Allwright (1988) introduces observation-based classroom research, in which he argues that teachers' treatment for learners' problems should be a concern. Lantolf (2000) argues the effect of peer mediation that "learners are able to scaffold each other quite effectively through use of a variety of interactive strategies that appear to be sensitive to the ZPD (zones of proximal development)" (p. 84).
2.2. Task Design and Principle
D.I.E. perceptual relativity exercise was introduced by Bennet and Bennett (1993) at the 19th International JALT Conference in Omiya. The D.I.E. model is an analysis method, which classifies all comments into three categories: description, interpretation, and evaluation. "Description" shows fact, evidence, and something that is agreed upon by all. "Interpretation" is analysis or explanation, which could be different by one's culture background, knowledge, and experience. "Evaluation" means judgment or conclusion based on the "Interpretation". Ellis (1991) proposes "consciousness raising (C·R)" as a supplement. C·R tasks are intended to develop awareness of language features at the level of understanding rather than of noticing by focusing on form. Thornbury (1997) also introduces reformulation and reconstruction activities deployed for consciousness-raising purposes. Many researchers, such as Foster and Skehan (1996), Ellis (2003), and Prabhu (1987), also suggest that task implementation organized as pre-, mid-, and post-task stages may influence learners' language production.

I designed a one school-year syllabus in the systematical way using the D.I.E. model as a device to raise students' consciousness of reasoning, and made it an overall key to the course as well for guiding students towards debates. I used the idea of three stages of a task-based lesson in two ways: (1) a local way of use, which means one set of tasks includes pre-, main-, and post-tasks, and (2) its use with a global or broad perspective as well, that is, to divide a school year into three periods: pre-task period (April – July), main task period (September – November), and post-task period (December – January), using D.I.E. concept for each period respectively: "description stage", "interpretation stage", and "evaluation stage".

Before summer vacation students were given various descriptive speech presentation tasks to practice systematical paragraph construction (pre-task period), and after summer vacation interpretive/analytical speech presentation tasks and debate tasks were assigned (main-task period). From December to January students reflected what they learned meta-cognitively and retrospectively (post-task period). Each period included both planned and unplanned tasks. All the tasks used for the project were locally composed of three stages of tasks. The local use of three stages of a task and three categories of D.I.E. model were meticulously organized for each debate task.

3. Research Project
Students orally handled their meanings in natural settings at the end of the school year. How did the task-based learning through debate effect students' oral English learning? What aspects of language learning were involved in students' language development? To explore these puzzles the following research project was formulated.

3.1. Participants
The third year and a part of the second year of my program was mainly examined out of five school years of elective oral communication classes I taught. The class had nine students: eight girls and one boy. This was a 4-credit class (three 65-minute classes a week) for third year high school students.

Interlanguage production of these students was examined, usually as one group and
occasionally as two groups: experienced group (three students who took this course for two school-years continuously and a returnee from Wales) and less-experienced group (five students who took this course for one school year). On a parallel with this elective OCC class the students took usual English classes such as grammar-translation classes. All the students were preparing for entrance examinations and eventually entered colleges.

3.2. Hypotheses
How did students' language production change from before to after debate tasks in terms of fluency, complexity, and accuracy? If students' language production changed after debate tasks, something that affected learners' output must have happened during debate tasks. Then what did students do during debate tasks in terms of language modification and production?

Hypothesis 1
Development of learners' language production is seen in the difference of learners' language production before and after debate tasks in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity.

It is predicted that the number of c-units per minute and the number of words per 10 seconds increase and the numbers of pauses and errors per c-unit reduce (features of fluency and accuracy) after debate tasks, while self-initiated clarification attempts increase at first and then decrease, as Iwanaka (2005) reports. Students' utterances are also predicted to include more complex expressions with subordination, tense, and structure complexity (a feature of complexity) during and after debate tasks.

Hypothesis 2
Students' argumentation is produced and modified during debate tasks with on-line planning.

I examine Hypothesis 1 quantitatively, and Hypothesis 2 qualitatively.

3.3. Procedure
Students' samples of oral language production videotaped in 14 tasks were transcribed. The data were coded/marked according to the following categories: errors, pauses, self-initiated clarification attempts, and paraphrased and improvised speech acts. In this study, repetitions, non-lexical sounds, and self-corrections were all categorized into self-initiated clarification attempts, following Shehadeh (1999) instead of taking them as deficiency (Dörnyei & Kormos, 1998) or disfluency (Ortega, 1999; Skehan, 2001). Complexity was measured by the number of forms used in students' speech, which were classified into four levels of complexity according to the forms in textbooks of junior and senior high schools in Japan (L1: junior high 1, L2: junior high 2, L3: junior high 3, L4: senior high).

For the purpose of the present study, I selected mainly two sets of planned and unplanned tasks before and after debate tasks to examine how learners' language production changed, and also chose one debate task to explore what was involved in their language development. Besides these main tasks, I also used some other tasks to see overall transition over time.
Table 1. Paired t-Tests (Two-Tail) Comparing Before and After Debate tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>T value</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C-units per minute</td>
<td>Before (Sep.)</td>
<td>7.56</td>
<td>2.719</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After (Dec.)</td>
<td>12.10</td>
<td>2.195</td>
<td>-7.181</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>p &lt; .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pauses per c-unit</td>
<td>Before (Sep.)</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.450</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After (Dec.)</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.040</td>
<td>2.385</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>p &lt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words per 10 sec.</td>
<td>Before (Sep.)</td>
<td>12.46</td>
<td>4.896</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After (Dec.)</td>
<td>19.09</td>
<td>3.973</td>
<td>-5.032</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>p &lt; .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors per c-unit</td>
<td>Before (Sep.)</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.471</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After (Dec.)</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.303</td>
<td>2.975</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>p &lt; .05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Results
4.1. Hypothesis 1
The findings testing fluency and accuracy in planned tasks are shown in Table 1. The comparisons of two tasks before and after debate tasks show significant difference. The numbers of pauses and errors per c-unit in unplanned tasks also show significant difference (p<0.01), while the numbers of words (t(5)=1.858) and c-units (t(5)=1.770) did not, probably due to the small number of data. The development of learners' language production is statistically recognized in fluency and accuracy.

Seen closely, however, data show a slightly different phase in language production between planned and unplanned tasks. The number of errors in planned tasks shows a constant decrease in both descriptive tasks (before September, 2001) and interpretive tasks (from September, 2001), especially in experienced students' language production as shown in Figure 1. On the contrary, in unplanned condition, the transition of errors experienced students made is not so clear, while that of less-experienced students' shows a clear decrease.

Self-initiated clarification attempts increased at first then decreased as predicted (see Figure 2), as Iwanakka (2005) reported that beginners produce the least amount of self-initiated clarification attempts, intermediates the most, and advanced learners a lesser amount. The variation of the forms used by students in planned tasks over time is clearly seen in the bar graph in Figure 3. The forms in level 1 were by far the most frequently used in April of the first year. However, the use of them gradually went down, while the use of the forms in level 3 and level 4 gradually increased. A similar shift is seen in unplanned condition, but the use of higher level forms in unplanned tasks shows a sharp increase after debate tasks (from October). Complexity in students' language production especially in natural settings is observed to have increased after debate tasks.

In comparison of learners' language production in tasks before and after debate, their language development in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity was substantially proved by t-tests and bar graphs.

4.2. Hypothesis 2
The debate model I used for high school English classroom is a modified version for language
learning introduced by Pilon (1989). It is different from a cross-examination debate, which is commonly used in an academic debate (Fryar, Thomas, & Goodnight, 1991). This modified version gives learners opportunities to make both unplanned and planned speech during debate. Before carrying out the debate, students made strategic planning for debate preparation, based on the analysis of the issue by the D.I.E. model.

Students prepared their points, and also anticipated their opponents' points in advance, but their anticipation is not always matched by reality. The important point here is that they had to listen to the other side carefully and decide which response to use among those they prepared. If none of them matched, they had to go through this critical situation by responding on their own on the spot. There must have been some triggers that pushed
students to produce more language at such times. The following are examples how it happened during a debate task.

Example 1

S1 (D): That’s maybe true but if we [pause] if [pause] if we take 6-day school system, we also have time [pause] spend with family every after school and every evening. So [pause] that is [pause] no problem to have 6-day a week. [pause] I think so. And if we [pause] take 5-day school system, the level of education will [pause] go down and what do you think about this?

(pause) [pause]: missing words/letters, phonological error, [pause]: over 1 second, Self-initiated clarification attempts (repetition, non-lexical sounds, self-correction), Li transfer, improvised speech, paraphrasing. (A): Agree group, (D): Disagree group, «explanation»)

This is an excerpt from the debate “5-day-school-week system” held in November of the year just before the system started. This student paraphrased her opponent’s opinion and also her own script prepared in advance, straightening her head and looking at her opponents. She seems to have wanted to give more impact to her speech, paraphrasing and improvising with her own words instead of reading her script. Here we can see this is her choice. This debate task motivated her to use another source besides language, which predisposed her to paraphrase and improvise her points.

Example 2

S2 (A): 〈discussing it among themselves〉 Please respond (as) us. [pause] I think it is not answer [pause] to our question.
S3 (D): 〈discussing it among themselves〉 [pause] We think if you use extra lessons the time we spend [pause] and the time we control [pause] [ah] [pause]... it is [ah] [pause]... [ah]... If we [pause] if you have extra lesson we cannot control how to use time because it is less time to use [pause] for ourselves. So [pause]... 〈discussing it among themselves〉 and also if we go to school for 6 days, we can learn and we can spend time with friends and [pause] we can learn [ah] [pause] how to cooperate with other people. [Unn]

The student in charge of response to the “Agree” side didn’t address their point. Therefore, required by S2 in the Agree side to respond to them, S3 in the Disagree side improvised their defense. Here S3 also stretched her language ability to the maximum. At the same time we see pauses and self-initiated clarification attempts increase. Students are also seen to have been discussing among themselves what to say to their opponents.

5. Discussion

5.1. Language Testing

Students’ language development was seen in the difference of their language production before and after debate tasks.

However, some different indication between planned and unplanned tasks has been seen. While the transition of language production in planned tasks is quite consistent, unplanned
tasks show a particular transition, which might tell how language learning took place, as in the correlation of transition between errors and self-initiated clarification attempts, the change of the level of complexity, and consistent decrease of the number of pauses per c-unit over time. Since unplanned tasks can be considered to show learners' internalized language, one of the next targets in this type of research might be to examine how a planned task helps learners to produce their target language in an unplanned condition, repeating the same task in two different conditions.

5.2. Triggers for Language Output
As we have seen, there are several clues seen in the debate “5 day-School-Week System”, which might have played an important role as triggers to push students to stretch their language output more than they usually did. First of all, categorizing by using the D.I.E. model seems to have worked as a sort of consciousness raising device for reasoning, judging from students' speech acts in a debate task. The bar graph in Figure 4 shows the comparison of students' speech acts categorized into D.I.E. between their speech presentation in September (before debate tasks) and Debate 3 in November. Before practicing D.I.E. analysis, students' speeches were full of interpretations and evaluations, but few descriptions. During Debate 3, however, half of their expressions became descriptions while both interpretations and evaluations drastically decreased, which is likely to show that students' speech became more logical with their “evaluations” based on “interpretations” supported by “descriptions”.

Second, students seem to have been pushed to make greater use of their target language to speak effectively during debate, paraphrasing and improvising their point on the spot. Especially experienced students have tended to do so more than less-experienced students. At the same time, pauses also increased in number besides self-initiated clarification attempts. Here again the number of pauses, a measure of less fluency, could be also considered as a sign of the next step of language development.

Last but most importantly, students' collaboration in a mixed level group seems to have stretched their language, as zones of proximal development are created through interaction with more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1986). Students also discussed how to respond to their opponents, providing scaffolding to each other with words or concept (Donato, 1994: Lantolf, 2000).

With all the facts we have seen above, we can conclude students' speech acts largely changed during debate tasks.

6. Conclusion
To sum up all the findings we have seen in this paper, one crucial trend can be seen. Before reaching a fluent stage, learners start improvising and paraphrasing their speech or their interlocutor's. While doing so, they produce more self-initiated clarification attempts and pauses than staying within the usual limited safe stage. Those features usually judged as deficiency or disfluency of language ability might play an important role for language learning. The difficulty of language output could become a priming device for language learning. This learning stage, which I characterized as “the chaotic period”, might be
inevitable for many learners' oral language development.

Considering pedagogical purposes, this chaotic period should be brought into language teaching to help learners to stretch their target language use to the maximum. Debate could be one of the best tools. To predispose learners to plunge into the chaotic period, positive social atmosphere is necessary in the classroom, where learners can collaborate with each other. Collaboration is a key to overcome the chaos, turning “deficiency” into a positive device.

By building up their social relationship and playing an important role as a member of a group, my students raised the “quality of life” in the classroom (Allwright, 2003). Teachers' role might be to guide learners in this direction. Observing learners and their decision-making in the classroom gives teachers an important insight “to deepen their understandings of language learning and of life in the language classroom” (Allwright, 2005b, p. 28).

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References


