

# Focused Communication Tasks and their Use in an Informal Communicative Approach to Teaching

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The aims of this paper are to show how, in an English as a Second Language (ESL) situation where some focus on grammar is necessary to counteract fossilization and improve students' output, consciousness-raising tasks can be used to circumvent formal grammar teaching methods.

Concerning such classroom methodology, I will discuss some of my research on the following three issues: one, The design implications of consciousness-raising tasks; two, while mainly focusing on the pragmatic use of language for communication, whether such tasks can facilitate improved accuracy; and three, whether these tasks can be truly communicative.

The learners in this study are all females in their late teens or early twenties at Kyoiei Gakuen Junior College. They have all matriculated from high school and for the last six years have, depending upon their school, studied English for between 4 and 7 hours a week. This is above the minimum compulsory 3 core hours a week of English as required by

Mombusho. All English Majors at Kyoiei are required to take English Conversation as one of the fifteen subjects studied in the year, which amounts to two periods a week. Each period is of ninety minutes duration.

Throughout high school, English would have mainly been taught as an academic subject in preparation for university entrance examinations. However, it must be noted that since 1994 a new national curriculum which places more emphasis on English as a functional tool for communication has been implemented at high school level.

The main teaching method, then and now, remains "grammar translation" (Ellis, 1991), most likely in a lecture style teaching method, where 'Socratic' methods are rarely employed. Conversation, when taught, would have most likely been taught by what has been observed on many occasions to be a combination of Situational Language Teaching and the Audiolingual method.

The homogeneity of the Japanese education

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system shapes students in such a way that their schemata, vocabulary and knowledge of English grammar are all roughly equal. The students will all, to varying degrees, have been taught to translate, analyse, and answer comprehension questions because these are the skills necessary for the passing of university entrance examinations. English conversation, however, isn't required for university entrance at the present. Therefore, although English conversation is taught, any motivation for learning how to speak would have been almost entirely intrinsic, which may account for the considerable variation between students' conversational abilities.

Data collected during the college entrance procedure shows that many students have had regular contact with native English teachers. However, the context and contact time reported by the students go a long way to explain why the majority of them have not been able to make much headway in speaking English.

## STUDENTS' SOCIOCULTURAL BACKGROUND

Some sociocultural factors have such a profound effect on student behaviour patterns that they need to be taken into account by a non-native teacher when considering teaching methodology. Of the many factors that are often attributed to the Japanese, the following two are perhaps the most likely to cause frustration and anxiety for both student and non-Japanese teacher alike.

First, the general inertness that students tend to display in the classroom has often been attributed to what has been described as

Japan's vertical society, where relations between people are extremely sensitive to differences in status (Barnlund, 1987). It is these hierarchical role expectations that play a role in creating the desire for harmony within a group. The consequence of this is that students are constrained from expressing themselves in class for fear of offering an opinion that may be contrary to that of the teacher's. Such open criticism of one's superior is considered disrespectful. This, combined with the desire not to exceed one's station within the group, also inhibits students from speaking out as "Asserting oneself in a group is considered to be exhibitionism or presumption" (Kobayashi 1989).

The second is the ease with which interactions between student and non-Japanese teacher seem to break down into protracted silence which in essence, I believe, Noguchi attributed to the levels of cultural sensitivity and value given to conversational rules that exist to a greater or lesser extent across various cultures (1987).

In Japan those rules that are particularly valued by Japanese are face saving devices which protect both the interlocutors (Lebra, 1976). Therefore, as Noguchi points out, it is only natural that Japanese students will fashion their conversation according to these rules. Consequently, when Japanese students are faced with a situation where "face-protecting" rules and "conversation-protection" rules come into conflict, the culturally internalized rule will dominate. With this borne in mind one can see how greater attention and sensitivity toward not only linguistic factors but also sociolinguistic considerations are necessary

for culturally sensitive ESL teaching (1987), which is why I believe the use of pair work is best suited to alleviating the stress that Japanese students associate with large group work and intercourse between people of varying status and that pairing will lessen the conflict between different sociolinguistic rules.

## SYLLABUS DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

In order to facilitate my students' cross-cultural awareness and development as learners, I opted for a partially-negotiated curriculum, which can best be described in the following terms:

While a learner-centred curriculum will contain similar elements and processes to traditional curricula, a key difference will be that information by and from learners will be built into every phase of the curriculum process. Curriculum development becomes a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, since learners will be involved in decisions on content selection, methodology and evaluation. (Nunan, 1989:19)

Taking the sociolinguistic and cultural factors into consideration, I believe that the main advantages of learner-centredness will be that students are motivated by their responsibilities toward their fellow students and their teacher.

The English conversation course as a whole has been designed with regard to a combination of criteria. A needs analysis similar to a communicative needs analysis is taken each year by questionnaire. Based upon the needs

analysis, our curriculum goals are decided upon and our syllabus modified.

The syllabus, which has evolved over a number of years, basically remains a notional /functional syllabus based on the Threshold Level (van Elk & Alexander 1980). Regular student questionnaires give continuous feedback which may be used to modify the direction, content and methodology of the course.

By taking a more learner-centred approach the shock of transferring from what could be considered a very formal teaching situation to a perhaps more informal one can be lessened by making the student involvement a gradual process. This I do by having the students anonymously answer questionnaires that evaluate lessons in terms of materials and methodology employed. These questionnaires are written in Japanese for the following reasons; one, students feel more secure answering in their mother tongue as it avoids the complications of translating; and two, the various sociocultural factors mentioned above make direct questioning at this stage an inappropriate method of procuring students' real opinions about the teacher and the course. This method vastly increases the accuracy of the data received and aids in assessing the various learner types, their expectations and their evaluations.

In the process of reading the various comments made by students in the survey it became clear that there were four reasonably consolidated groups of opinion, these being:

- a) the overwhelming majority were extremely apprehensive about their communicative abilities and how this would

- effect their upcoming homestay in the U.S.;
- b) they wanted as much time as possible given over to just 'having fun and playing games in English' which on further enquiry was found to mean communicative task based activities;
  - c) a smaller but still substantial group said that they didn't want to keep making mistakes and that the teacher should ensure that they didn't; and
  - d) just over half didn't want to study any grammar at all.

## PEDAGOGIC APPROACH

Considering that the students are taking up to fourteen other subjects a week, most of which are related to the study of the English language, ie grammar, phonetics, composition, English literature etc., and considering the nature in which these subjects are taught, I decided, with regards to the findings of the questionnaire, to take a communicative approach to teaching. The methodology would be determined by the following principle:

that language learning comes about when the teacher gets learners to use the language pragmatically to mediate meaning for a purpose to do things which resemble in some measure what they do with their own language.[so that] They will learn a knowledge of the language itself, the formal and semantic properties of the medium, as they go along, without the teacher having to draw explicit attention to it. (Widdowson H G 1990:160).

The main methodological tool chosen in order to achieve these ends was the 'task',

'since it provides a purpose for a classroom activity which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake' (Richards et al 1986:284) and may be better defined as:

a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. (Nunan 1989:10).

Other points for communication tasks argued by Nobuyoshi and Ellis are that they are important in helping students develop what Brumfit (1984) terms "fluency" and "accuracy" by creating opportunities for students to draw on their linguistic knowledge while engaged in conversation. Other communication tasks are partly based on the hypothesis that by allowing students to compare their output with that of their partners they will be exposed to new linguistic forms which in turn will give them more opportunities to control and monitor forms that they may have already acquired. This linguistic competence is said by Brumfit to aid accuracy, whereas strategic competence as defined by Canele (1983) is one way in which spoken and non-spoken strategies can be used by students to try and overcome breakdowns in communication. Thus putting their learnt knowledge to use in genuine conversation helps to promote fluency (1993).

Given the principles that I had set, a suitable method of trying to offset what Selinker (1972) and Selinker & Lamendella (1979) have referred to as "fossilization" was needed – here I am concerned specifically with grammar fossilization – without reverting to

explicit grammar teaching, the solution also had to be a method that would interfere as little as possible with the development of strategies that would enable the students to get their meaning across.

## COMMUNICATION TASKS

Ellis (1982: p.75) has pointed out that tasks can be more or less communicative depending on how many of the following criteria are met:

1. The success of the enterprise generated by the materials must be demonstrated by the outcome and not the process of the activity. (See Corder 1977)
2. The focus of the enterprise must be on the message throughout, rather than on the channel, i.e. the speakers must be concerned with what they have to say rather than how they are going to say it.
3. There must be an 'information-gap', i.e. one speaker must not know what the other speaker is going to say, although at times he may be able to guess it.
4. The communication which the enterprise entails must be negotiated rather than predetermined. This will require the speakers to make adaptations both to what is said and to how it is said in the light of the feedback they receive.
5. The speakers involved should be allowed to use whatever resources — verbal and non-verbal — they possess, irrespective of whether these resources conform to normal native speaker behaviour or not.

The solution therefore was to select communication tasks that could be manipulated in some way to bring a particular grammatical feature to the fore without causing the student to switch her attention from meaning to form.

## THE FOCUSED COMMUNICATION TASK

For this I decided to use what Nobuyoshi & Ellis (1993) have termed as "focused communication tasks". "Focused communication tasks" differ from "unfocused communication tasks" in that either by design or the methodology used they cause a particular linguistic feature to come to the fore without the student switching her attention from meaning to form. Whereas in "unfocused communication tasks" no particular linguistic feature is given prominence, either by design or methodology.

Focused communication tasks can be designed so that a certain grammatical feature becomes either "natural", "useful" or "essential" (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1990). However, the problem here is that it is very difficult to design communication tasks where the student needs to use a particular grammatical structure, a point also made by Loschky & Bley-Vroman (1990), but one which I hope the following example will also demonstrate:

Consider a communication task where the task involves the use of 'be going to + infinitive to express intention'. No matter how hard the teacher tries to prevent it happening, once the activity becomes truly communicative, students will begin using the form 'will

+ infinitive' often incorrectly, but on occasion correctly, which means that the target structure has become 'natural', or 'useful' at best, but not 'essential'.

Another, and perhaps easier, way in which a communication task can remain essentially communicative and yet remain reasonably focused is through the methodology employed, for example, if a student is paired with a teacher and given a one-way picture description task. The teacher may give the following instructions: 'Look at the pictures. Tell me about the pictures. What is happening?' Under these circumstances the use of the present continuous tense could be considered 'natural' but not 'essential'. The student, for example, could use the passive voice and say 'Dinner is being cooked.' However, if the teacher re-phrases his request in an attempt to elicit a response using the present continuous tense, regardless of any other incorrect utterances then the task has become focused through the method used, and it is hoped that the student will utter something like 'He is cooking --'. Of course I accept that if the teacher had been more specific in his initial request then the student may have used the target structure the first time, but that would have defeated the purpose of the example.

It could be argued that this is not a fully communicative task, as Nobuyoshi Ellis (1993) point out, that from the teacher's view point it is not a fully communicative task because the focus has changed from message to form. However, from the students' point of view the task is communicative as long as she believes the request for clarification is directed at improving the conveyance

of meaning rather than form.

Implementing communication tasks that rely heavily on methodology rather than design present relatively few problems when carried out in small classes of, say, three or four students, but implementing such tasks in a class of thirty presents a number of difficulties that need to be addressed if they are to have any value as communicative consciousness-raising activities at all. These difficulties mainly stem from the large student-to-teacher ratio which makes the monitoring and requesting of improved output more difficult. Now, obviously the teacher can't be in two places at the same time, so alternative ways of assisting him in helping students concentrate more on their output are needed. One way in which I believe this may best be achieved is at the level of design and methodology.

### Task Design and Methodology for Large Classes

Consider the one-way picture description task mentioned above. For it to work requires the presence of a teacher or knower, who knows what the purpose of the task is and how to go about achieving it. Therefore it is limited in its application to those circumstances where a sufficient number of knowers are available.

However, looked at from another angle, in a class of students that have had considerable tuition in grammar, we have at our disposal a whole class of 'potential knowers'. The students already possess the knowledge of the grammatical structure that the task is trying to raise and all we are trying to do,

essentially, is to get them to recall and apply the structure for themselves under real operating conditions. Therefore, under the circumstances I feel justified in using one student out of the pair as a substitute teacher — hereafter referred to as the elicitor — by secretly attaching a label in Japanese to her picture informing her of the target structure and the way in which the task is to be performed, and keeping the other student as the subject of the task — hereafter referred to as the subject — by keeping her unaware of the other's task. This elicitor-subject combination, I have found, is quite successful as long as: one, the task is only performed once within any one lesson period; and two, that there is a sufficient break before repeating the activity with the roles reversed.

Amongst student survey feedback is useful information which aids in distinguishing between those students that Clyne has pointed out as being intrinsically interested in and adept at a language's structure and those skilled in its function (1985), a difference which, when exploited, can be put to use in the pairing of students for consciousness-raising tasks. I believe that by pairing an accuracy orientated student with a fluency orientated one, that they may be able to learn from each other, the fluency orientated student by the other's attention to 'accuracy' and the accuracy orientated student by the other's communication strategies.

Essentially though what we need are: materials that make the target structure 'essential' for completion of the task without detracting too much from the characteristics that make a task communicative; tasks designed in such a way that the subject does not

become conscious of the ulterior motive behind the task; and finally tasks that free the teacher to monitor the class and to encourage those students who are having difficulty in producing the target structure.

One such method that I have found to meet the above criteria is again a picture description task but one in which the students work in pairs. The materials consist of three picture cartoon stories; two of which are identical and the other almost identical except for small points that will require the use of the target structure to differentiate it from the others, i.e. the slight difference between 'The car is crashing or has crashed' and 'The car is going to crash.'

One student is given one cartoon from the identical pair which has the target structure and instructions written on it and the other student receives the two remaining cartoons.

The students are then instructed that, without looking at each other's cartoons, they have to discuss the events portrayed in order for the student with two cartoons to decide which of them is the same as her partner's.

As with all activities and methods, this presents us with a variety of advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage of this combination of design and method is that it's flexible enough to be used in large classes, unlike those tasks which require the constant attention of the teacher. But having said that, it must be acknowledged that these tasks are difficult to design for most grammatical structures other than the past tense and that it is extremely difficult to detect 'avoidance' (Schechter 1974) or to prevent students from

just circumventing the target structure, as once happened in the example above when one student replaced 'going' with 'about' in the sentence 'the car is going to crash'. This type of problem has led me to conclude that the major weak point of designed activities is that they are better suited for generalisms.

In spite of being contrived, the task described above manages to retain most of the five conditions that Ellis (1982:75) points out as being necessary for a task to be truly "communicative". However, the two areas in which the task does fail, are:

Condition (2) "The focus of the enterprise must be on the message throughout, rather than the channel". From the teacher's view point this is obviously not so because the focus of the enterprise is on the "channel". And, of course, as Nobuyoshi & Ellis (1993) point out we cannot be certain that the subjects do not become aware of the need to focus on the channel.

Condition (5), "non-verbal" communication has to be denied. This is because I have noticed some elicitors use the same gestures that I use in other situations when hinting that a subject has made a tense error. The significance of the latter being, is that it is quite probable that the subject has become aware of the specific need to focus on the channel.

While it can be said that these two failings detract slightly from the overall communicativeness of the task, it cannot be said that they will detract from what Rutherford & Sharwood Smith (1985:110) call the consciousness-raising activity's "degree of elaboration" and will, if anything, slightly increase the "[degree] of explicitness" due to the fact that both students are

now conscious of the need to focus on a particular grammatical structure.

On the whole, student feedback on consciousness-raising activities has been very positive. Especially from those students who are taking the teacher training option, as it seems that they equate being in the position of 'elicitor' as equivalent to that of teacher and therefore they view the task as a teacher training exercise. So far the indications are that when ever a student plays the role of 'subject' they treat consciousness-raising tasks in much the same way as they do other information gap activities, and as of yet, I haven't noticed any significant decline in levels of participation or enthusiasm for consciousness raising tasks. Those few problems that do arise, however, are usually due to either my failure to communicate the instructions for the activity clearly or those students who cannot complete the task due to a lack of 'knowledge'. Although the latter is fairly infrequent due to their similar educational backgrounds, it does present problems which need to be addressed, though I don't propose to go into them in this paper.

Feedback via the questionnaires and general enquiry shows that on the whole students don't mind being paired with different partners for consciousness-raising tasks and as I haven't observed any real negative aspects, other than the odd student who doesn't want to be parted from her friend, I will continue to pair accuracy orientated students with fluency orientated ones. I also believe that another advantage with this method of pairing is that students get a chance to experience another students' interlanguage and that this variety in input has its benefits.

The following is example of student inter-course to demonstrate the kind of dialogue that these tasks generate:

- S<sub>1</sub> Ah sorry...  
 S<sub>2</sub> The car crash in the corner.  
 S<sub>1</sub> The car crashed and its headlamp broken.  
 S<sub>2</sub> Headlamp? No. No. mada... going to, going to crash.  
 S<sub>1</sub> Ah... It's going to crash. Ah, ah, going to crash a... a... yes.

Note: mada is Japanese for 'not yet'

As we can see, such tasks promote greater negotiation of meaning by the very fact that the students have to continually check their comprehension and adjust their own output.

Due to the task's design the students become more focused on the language needed for successful negotiation and completion of the task. This in turn encourages them to think about their output momentarily, as denoted by the gap represented as "... " in line 4. Although I cannot be sure, I believe the student is drawing on her implicit knowledge because of the relatively short amount of time needed to reformulate her answer. This need to focus on a key grammatical feature while continually checking and adjusting their language is believed to promote "acquisition" as claimed through the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1983).

On the other hand, the need for students to produce more accurate and understandable output pressures students to improve the accuracy of their output, as can be seen by the emergence of the grammatically correct utterance 'it's going to crash'. Having

witnessed this kind of improvement many times during the past two years, I believe that this may lend support for Swain's Comprehensible Output Hypothesis (1985).

In some instances students don't improve the accuracy of their output and are just content to continue repeating the same utterance until their partner develops a solution. It has been argued that this kind of student is "functionally oriented" and is just generally satisfied in getting the message across (Nobuyoshi & Ellis 1993). This may be a plausible reason, but I think there are other possibilities: for example the student doesn't yet possess the required knowledge, or the structure has yet to be internalized and the student is having difficulty referring to her store of learned knowledge.

It may also be possible that some students do not relate the request for clarification with a grammatical error and therefore mistake the request as meaning there is something else wrong such as her vocabulary or pronunciation. However if the error persisted I would consider resorting to some other method.

Another point is the need for the teacher is the need for the teacher to be able to distinguish between what – Corder calls "errors" and "mistakes" (1981). The reasons for this are:

- (1) As Johnson has pointed out in his article on mistake correction, is that the term 'error' denotes the fact that "the student's interlanguage knowledge is faulty", ie the student "may either not know how a tense of English works, or have the wrong idea."

Whereas the term 'mistake' on the other hand, denotes "a lack of processing ability", ie A malformation caused by under the stress of the moment (1988). The relevance of this is that if students continue making 'errors' and further investigation reveals that indeed "the student's interlanguage knowledge is faulty" then there is a possibility that the student has not learned that particular structure and therefore it cannot be raised because it isn't there. Remedial action may then be necessary.

(2) 'Mistakes', I believe are a natural part of learning and in these tasks play 'no significance to the process of learning' Corder (1981:10) and so are generally ignored.

(3) After considering Vigil and Oller's (1976) model on feedback I decided that the optimal method of cognitive feedback for such tasks would be to deal with them at the end of an activity by giving students model answers with which they can compare their own answers and see for themselves where they went wrong. A position which I believe is also supported by Johnson (1988) and, of course, not unreasonable considering the position being taken on explicit grammar instruction.

Finally, two questions that I believe are worthy of further investigation: How much interference does the less grammatical input from their partner have on their own language development? and; How much does reverting to one's mother tongue detract from the value of the input, as in the instance of the utterance "mada" which means "not yet"?

## CONCLUSION

Given the parameters within which I chose to work, the aim of this paper was to show how I believe focused communication tasks can be used in an attempt to counter fossilization of students' grammar by raising prominent structural features to a level where students become conscious of the need for accuracy, and how it is possible to achieve this without interfering with students' communicative skills development or the need to revert to explicit teaching methods.

Such tasks are not without their problems, but I believe that the following positive points of consciousness raising through focused communicative tasks are worth considering:

(1) Early data by Second Language Acquisition researchers and my own observations indicate that such activities can be effective in focusing students attention on specific structures without reverting to explicit instruction.

(2) They provide a chance for students to work with each other in an active and relatively spontaneous way.

(3) Such activities provide real operating conditions under which to work and that any realisations that students make are most likely to be self-discovered.

(4) Feedback via subsequent surveys show that they are as popular as other communication tasks.

(5) They were seen by the students as a positive response by the teacher to the surveys that they were often been asked to complete.

Finally, it was shown that focused communication tasks require careful and methodical preparation in their design and that although best suited to small classes can under certain circumstances be implemented in larger classes.

Given the extra preparation involved and the methodological problems, I feel that they may not be viable in some teaching situations, nevertheless in my situation they are viable and of great value. I intend to continue using these tasks as they have proven to be the best solution to my problems so far.

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