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A STUDY OF ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS, TASK DIFFICULTIES AND STUDENTS' SATISFACTION

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Abstract

To speak English as a foreign language, it is necessary to know a certain amount of grammar which includes vocabulary and pronunciation (Bygate, 1987; Ur, 1996; Harmer, 2001). Form-focused practice, however, limits students' choices of variation to talk. In addition, paying attention to accuracy sometimes discourages students from using the target language. As many of the Japanese students have anxiety about communicating orally in English, it is important to gain their confidence through speaking tasks. Having successful experiences can make students gain confidence (Locke, 1996), but the difficulty of achieving goals can also encourage students even though they fail to attain challenging goals (Mikami, 2017). To have a clear view of an appropriately difficult task level is a problem for language teachers. This study aims to examine both appropriate levels for English speaking tasks and students' satisfaction in a regular 4-skill English course where only written exams were carried out. In order to reduce students' unwillingness to communicate in English, goal-relevant speaking tasks were used as a pair work activity for freshmen in each class over a 15-week term in a Japanese university. Students in the test-group used slightly more difficult materials than the control-group. The students in the test group also invariably had different partners, whereas the ones in the control group usually had the same partners. To quantitatively investigate students' improvement of speaking skills, the number of words they uttered within speeches about a predefined topic was counted. Also, satisfaction surveys were conducted to measure

the qualitative data. In conclusion, students in the test group found the tasks more difficult, but they produced richer speech and they were also more satisfied with the course. More importantly, the percentage of the students who gained more confidence in using English was higher in the test-group than the control-group.

Keywords

Oral Communication, Task Difficulties, Students' Satisfaction, WTC, Anxiety

1. Introduction

It is a challenging period of enormous change in English education in Japan. The guideline of foreign language teaching by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (2017) has emphasized students' actual communication using the word "interaction." They also state that teachers should encourage their students to speak without fear of making mistakes.

English education in Japan focuses on grammar and reading, rather than speaking and listening as it is necessary to make students ready for high school and university entrance examinations (Yashima, 2002, Iwamoto, 2016). Therefore, accuracy is valued as the first priority although communicative teaching has been widely accepted among language teachers in Japan. However, placing a high demand on accuracy can have harmful effects on students' eagerness to speaking English. As a result, many Japanese students are hesitant to speak English. This led to the MEXT statement above.

Even so, many English textbooks for junior and high school students used in Japan are designed to focus on 4 skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Each unit in the textbooks has a certain grammar item which students are required to master. Therefore, speaking tasks in the textbooks are used to practice the grammar item orally. These oral activities such as pattern drills are called "structure-oriented exercises (Bygate, 1987)" and the exercises can be useful for the purposes of demonstration and familiarization, but they limit students' choice of how to express themselves being form-focused approaches which force the students to use the grammar item explicitly or implicitly.

On the contrary, some of the speaking tasks for college or university students focus on content of the text rather than grammar items. Opinion exchange, discussion or debates are set as speaking tasks and they are usually for upper-intermediate or much higher level. One of the problems found in these tasks is that students usually spend some time to prepare before they start the task. Therefore, no matter how much time they use for these speaking tasks, they do not get used to having a smooth conversation under time pressure. Also, these

tasks require much more time in a lesson than the tasks designers have expected, and due to this, not all of the speaking tasks may not be adopted in an actual classroom.

Therefore, it is necessary to find suitable speaking tasks which can encourage students to speak English without hesitation. Some important factors we need to consider for speaking tasks will be discussed next.

2. Literature Review

2.1 To Reduce Students' Anxiety

There are some researches on Japanese students in EFL classrooms, and silence in Japanese classrooms has been pointed out (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Littlewood, 1999). It is strongly related to Japanese cultural characteristics. According to King's investigation (2013), student talk in his 48-hour-observation of 30 different EFL classes was only 5.21% of the time. From this, we can say that the students are not accustomed to speaking aloud in Japanese EFL classrooms. Therefore, it is necessary to provide opportunities to use the language orally.

Sawir (2005) studied language difficulties in international students including Japanese in Australia and found out that their prior learning experiences affected their learning. The students had learned English focusing on grammar and reading skills in teacher-centered classrooms, not conversational skills in their home countries. In the study, East and Southeast Asian countries were treated as an issue and a need for developing better communicative teaching and learning practices in the home countries were emphasized.

Probably because of the learning experience and also a personality, many of the Japanese students have hesitation in speaking English. It is called "communication apprehension (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986)," which is a kind of shyness characterized by a fear of or anxiety about communicating with people. As a pedagogical implication, they clearly say that educators should make the learning context less stressful.

As reported by Isoda (2009), Japanese students tend to have the strongest feeling for uneasiness about the speaking among 4 skills of English learning. At the same time, they wish to be better speakers because they know that speaking skills will enable them to communicate spontaneously by producing sentences orally in the real situations.

To reduce the students' hesitation, we need to take Willingness to Communicate (WTC) into consideration (Yashima, 2002). The speaking product needs to be accurate enough to make listeners understand the message, but fluency is more important for Japanese learners who are afraid of making many mistakes. Hence, it is important for teachers to

provide tasks that students can have a stronger desire to complete enthusiastically, rather than to speak accurately. In addition, she concludes that favorable experiences of communication reduce anxiety and influence attitudes and motivation.

One of the possibilities to reduce students' stress or anxiety is to provide speaking tasks that students do in smaller groups (Skehan, 1998). Storch (2007) investigated the efficacy of pair work in language classes by comparing the performance of pairs and individuals on an editing task. According to his research, the pairs spent longer on completing the task and could pool their linguistic knowledge.

Al-khresheh, M., Khaerurrozikin, A., & Zaid, A. (2020) researched on Indonesian students learning Arabic and found that using pictures could reduce students' anxiety. In addition, students felt comfortable in speaking without even referring to their mother tongue. Pictures can also help them enrich their vocabulary, which will encourage them to speak and enhance their oral performance.

2.2 To Raise Students' Satisfaction

In order to find out how to offer successful speaking practice experiences to students, Locke (1996) suggests providing goal-relevant activities. Having successful experiences can make students gain confidence and encourage them to have better performance. Students involve in the activities when they believe that achieving the goal is possible and important. Therefore, speaking activities and tasks must be at the appropriate level to the students. This would mean that task difficulty would be the next matter to consider.

Thinking about task difficulty, Krashen's theory of second language acquisition (1982) needs to be considered. It is important to provide meaningful communication where students can engage actively. However, EFL learners do not usually learn in the same way as children in English-speaking countries learn their mother tongue as Krashen emphasizes in his 'learning-acquisition hypothesis.' Even so, giving opportunities which are similar to the real world that students may encounter can make the students activate strategies when they face difficulties in the interaction. It is also a natural order when learning a new language.

Nunun (1989) proposes that interesting and relevant tasks should be created at the proper level of difficulty. If the task is too easy, students do not have to struggle in using various knowledge of the world. At the same time, if the task is too difficult, they may be discouraged when trying to use the language. Therefore, the appropriate level of speaking tasks is ' $i + 1$ ', which has been known as 'input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1989).' The student can improve their language skills through receiving input (' i ') which is slightly higher level of knowledge than the one currently possessed.

Mikami (2017) focused on 130 first-year undergraduates to see relationships between goal setting, intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy in a reading and a grammar class. The students set the goals by themselves and even though students failed to attain challenging goals, they repeatedly attempted to achieve the goals. She concludes that goal commitment appears to play the most important role in enhancing both students' intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy. This study tells that goal difficulty contributes to intrinsic motivation.

In a study on effectiveness of information gap tasks in the context of Iran (Namaziandost, Hashemifardnia and Shafiee, 2019), they say that information-gap activities encourage students' practice of the target language receptively. Students need to make themselves understood in the activities by using their current proficiency to the fullest. The experience of communicating with people successfully can give the students satisfaction and also confidence.

3. Research Method

3.1. Subjects

This research targeted 132 freshmen in four English classes of a Japanese university. They belonged to non-English major departments, but English was a compulsory subject for them. The English course was consisted of 15 lessons, usually once a week, including the mid-term and the final exam. Two classes were from Nursing department and two classes of mixed students from three other different departments. All of them used the same textbook and took the same mid-term and final exam following the same syllabus as the other English classes in the school. Therefore, time used for speaking practice in a lesson was limited and approximately 15 minutes were used in each lesson.

One class in the single and one class in the mixed department classes were designated as the control group, and the other two classes were the test group. The information gap tasks that were set for pair work for the test group were always slightly more challenging than the ones for the control group. The students' seats were assigned in English classes, so students in the control group had the same partner according to the seating arrangements. On the other hand, the students in the test group always had different partners each lesson. Pair or group work was commonly used in the four classes.

3.2. Speaking Tasks

Information gap tasks used in the classes were mainly a description of items, for example, numbers or various kinds of shapes such as diamonds, stars and rectangles, in different sizes or colors, shown on a screen. The items were sometimes displayed using solid

line, dashed or sometimes wavy lines. In order to reduce students' anxiety in speaking English, pair work was used. One student sat in front of another students to make the pair. Without preparation, students facing the screen (explainers) started explaining what kind of items there were or where they were on the screen without any preparation to the students (drawers) with their back to the screen. Dictionaries or any electronic devices were not used during the activities. Explainers were not allowed to see what their partners were drawing. The drawers could make clarifications if necessary. At the end of the task, both students compared items on the screen and the illustrated depiction.

Most importantly, the clear goal for the students was to not give up completing the task. When the drawer finished the depiction following the partners' explanation, the task was deemed completed.

Figure 1 was one of the examples of the tasks. Left objects were for the control group and the right ones were for the test group. Let us take a closer look at the Figure 1 more in detail. Students usually imagine a shape of triangle with one of the corners at the top. Therefore, it is not easy for them to describe an upside-down triangle. Also, 'Roman numerals', are not familiar to the students at all. Also, it is much easier for them to say the number 12 than explaining that the number 2 is written under the number 1. In the bottom right box, the circle is on the center line of the box. Lastly, a broken line was used for the test group.

There were other tasks used as speaking tasks. In a direction task, for example, only pairs in the test group had "dead end" on a map. They also had sold out items in a shopping task. As described so far, students in the test group faced more difficulties in the tasks than the control group students.

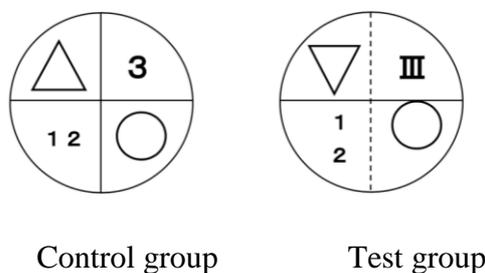


Figure 1: *Example of Information Gap Task 1*

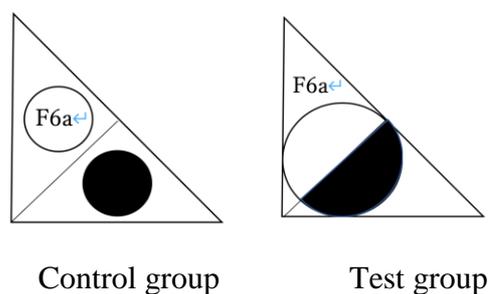


Figure 2: *Example of Information Gap Task 2*

3.3 Research Method

In order to examine the effectiveness of information gap tasks to improve students' speaking skills, two kinds of researches were carried out. The first one was a quantitative research to see if the students improved their speaking skills quantitatively. The second one was done through qualitative surveys to examine if students were willing to communicate with classmates in English by doing the speaking tasks, and if they were also satisfied with the course.

Firstly, the students had a one-minute speech about pre-determined topics: 'food they would like to recommend to their friends' at the beginning of the course and 'a place they would like to recommend to their friends' at the end of the course. They used recorded their speeches using IC recorders. The voice data was then sent to the instructor by email and all the data was input to a spreadsheet. Only data that had both a pre- and a post-test were used to be analyzed. These speeches were finally transcribed and the number of words per minute (WPM) was counted for comparison.

Next, two qualitative questionnaires were also conducted at the end of the course to see if students were mentally motivated. The first questionnaire designed by the instructor was done to assess the validity of the speaking activities from the viewpoint of students. The questionnaire was made with Likert scales from one to six. The bigger scale meant a stronger agreement with the statements. In order to know if students were favorable to the tasks or not, their result was categorized "negative (scales from one to three)" and "affirmative (scale four to six) in this study. Students could leave comments if they wished to.

The other questionnaire incorporated a computer-scored answer sheet which was set by the school and asked students about their satisfaction with the course. Feedback of the results was shown with percentages, omitting student number and names. Scales used for the questionnaire were from one to five, and scale one and two showed negative opinions on the statement, and scale four and five were affirmative opinions. Scale one and five showed stronger feelings. The middle scale, three, means "hard to decided/neither." In order to

analyze the results, scale one and two were categorized as agreement with the statement, and four and five were admitted as disagreement.

All the data was processed as statistical information and analyzed.

4. Results

4.1 Quantity: WPM

Table 1 shows number of words students used for their one-minute speeches in the pre- and post-tests. According to the result of average WPM, students in every class used more words in the post-test. However, it is hard to say that students in the class 4 made an improvement from this result.

Table 1: *Words per Minute in the Pre- and Post-Tests*

		Control Group		Test Group	
		Class 1 (n=23)	Class 2 (n=35)	Class 3 (n=21)	Class 4 (n=37)
Pre-test	Mean	37.92	35.14	30.14	31.00
	SD	13.47	10.10	11.54	11.52
Post-test	Mean	45.26	43.89	42.1	36.8
	SD	17.09	13.38	9.53	13.38

4.2 Satisfaction

4.2.1. The Validity of the Speaking Tasks

According to the result of the questionnaires related to the speaking tasks (see Table 2 below), we found significant differences between the control group and the test group. Focusing on the test group, they needed less preparation before speaking. They also liked communicating with people more, and had more favorable attitudes towards learning new words than the control group. Interestingly, statistics showed that the students in the test group enjoyed the speaking tasks more than the ones in the control group even though they felt the tasks were much more difficult than the other. More importantly, test group students recognize more deeply that their speaking skills had improved by working on the speaking tasks. On the other hand, according to the results of the control group, the students felt that the tasks were much easier, but the percentage of their recognition of their improvement in speaking was lower than the test group.

Table 2: *Average Scales of Validity of the Speaking Tasks*

	Control Group	Test Group
needed preparation before speaking	3.64	3.07
liked communication	3.64	4.21
tried to learn new words	3.50	4.28
enjoyed the speaking tasks	4.50	5.50
felt the tasks were difficult	2.00	3.93
recognized improvement of speaking skills	3.86	4.21

4.2.2. Course Evaluation

According to Table 3, results of the course evaluation showed more positive feedback from the test group than the control group. Taking a close look at them, firstly, more students in the test group deemed that the course was designed to attract participants. Secondly, they believed that the course was worth taking. The most noticeable difference among the results was the percentages for the question about growth of their confidence. The test group students believed that they gained confidence more than those in the control group. And lastly, they had higher degree of satisfaction with the course. In fact, all the members in Class 4 in the test group were satisfied with the course, while only half of the Class 2 students in the control group, answered that they were content with the course. Compared to the control group, on the whole, percentages of class 3 and 4 students' satisfaction of the course in test group were higher.

Table 3: *Average Scale of Course Evaluation*

The course was designed...	Control Group		Test Group	
	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4
to attract participants	89%	74%	96%	83%
to be worth taking it	89%	56%	86%	71%
to gain confidence	79%	59%	88%	73%
to be satisfied	74%	52%	100%	70%

* percentages in the table indicate the total percentages of the affirmative side (scale 4 and 5)

5. Discussion

Judging from the results showing WPM in the one-minute speeches in the pre-test, English production level by class 1 and 2 was higher than the students in class 3 and 4.

Therefore, it is understandable to hear their voices saying the tasks were easy. However, they had a stronger feeling of having time to prepare for speaking in advance. This result could be due to being worried about accuracy when doing the tasks.

Next point we would like to focus on is improvement of class 3 students. The average number of words in the post-test was 42.1 and it was closer to the production by the control group even though class 3 students used less words in pre-test compared to the control group. Actually, they gained about 12 words more, and this is the biggest improvement among all of the four classes respectively. Their smallest SD indicates that the amount of words in their speeches was less spread out. On the contrary, the biggest SD of class 1 shows that there was a big difference between the highest number of words and the lowest one.

However, it is too much to say that the control group students improved based on the results of WPM of class 4. In fact, their improvement was the least of the four. Even so, they were highly motivated and satisfied with the course judging from the course evaluation though the evaluation included study using the textbook and other activities.

Goals of the tasks, in other words, knowing when they finished the task, were clear to the students, but it did not mean that they completed the task correctly. Naturally, the pairs worked together to find out why they misunderstood and what was a better way to explain after the activities. Here, we need to be careful from the view point of “successful experiences.” If it meant finishing the task correctly, there was some doubt that they did so. However, if the goal was to tackle the task by completing it with partners in a good atmosphere, they actually completed that goal. Even so, we cannot deny that they might have learned the ‘wrong grammar’ from their peers (Storch, 2007) in this study.

Both small group and pair work are common features in learner-centered classrooms, but there is a matter we need to consider. Relationships in the control group might be stronger as they always had the same partners, but one of them left a comment on the questionnaire that he/she wished to have a different partner. Although the student couldn't be identified from the data, possible factors are a problem of different proficiency or compatibleness between the partners. In Storch's study (2007), he says that not all pair work was successful against his expectation in terms of collaboration. There may be a case that only one student in the pair governs the interaction in a pair of dominant and passive students. As it was the only comment on the pair work, it would be easy to overlook it. However, the comment tells us the importance of providing opportunities to talk with different people.

6. Conclusion and Further Study

Now, we would like to interpret the results mentioned so far based on the aim of this study. Speaking tasks which showed the goal clearly were used to improve students speaking skills and approximately 15 minutes were spent for it in every lesson. As a result, the students in all of the four classes increased their number of words in the post-test compared to the pre-test. The test group students who felt the task was more difficult were less anxious about using English and more satisfied with the course. They also gained confidence in using English. Therefore, the level of task difficulty is an important factor in making the students satisfied. Also, it is desirable to make up pairs with different members as whether the pair work goes well or not can depend on each member's proficiency level. Proficiency levels can influence decisions about task content and the level of input to the task. It is also necessary to consider differences in characteristics of individual students as the communication relationship can have an effect and thus randomizing pairs would be desirable.

It is effective to continue having speaking tasks occasionally even in a short period of time. We found that many of the students engaged in the speaking activities as the tasks were fun, like playing games, with their pairs. Through these activities, the students' hesitation in speaking English seemed to be reduced. When considering future research, our next step would be to tackle more meaningful activities which are similar to the real-world use of English, where accuracy is also important while maintaining interest and motivation.

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