

Students Perception of a Content-Learning Tasked Based Activity that Uses Authentic Material to Promote Meaningful Conversation

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ガス・ブレンナン. 有意義な会話を身に付ける為の真の自主性のある資料を使用するタスク活動を学生がどう感じるか. *Studies in International Relations* Vol. 33, No. 1. October 2012. pp. 65 – 71.

第2言語として英語を学習する日本人の多くは、コミュニケーションのツールとして英語を使用することに難しさを感じている。これは大学生にとっても珍しいことではない。今や小学校5年生時から英語の授業が必須であるにもかかわらずだ。英語の授業は教師が主体となり概要説明や決められた表現のみを練習するもので、学生が中心になって行うアクティビティにはほとんど時間を割り当てない。英語、特にスピーキングスキルで、学生自身の考えや表現を必要とする日々のニュースを取り上げたアクティビティに対し学生がどのように感じるかを調査した。本論文ではその調査結果を報告する。このようなアクティビティは大学生に非常に有益で、又習得を目指す言語のコミュニケーション能力を伸ばすものであると本研究は結論する。

(1) Introduction

Many Japanese ESL learners find it difficult to use English as a communicative tool. This is not uncommon for university students, even though they are required to start lessons in fifth grade. Classes are too teacher-centered and focus mainly on presentation and practice, with little time allocated to production and student-centered activities. This paper reports on the results of a survey exploring students' perception of a news task-based activity that requires student production in English, focusing on speaking skills. This paper will first review related literature, then explains what the activity is, followed by the methodology of the questionnaire, the results, and finally a discussion of these results.

(2) Background

The topic of the research is an analysis of spoken interaction, one that looks at the effects of content-based learning on the ESL (English as a Second Language) learners' conversational abilities. The primary reason for wanting to undertake this research is to understand whether content-based learning is a viable tool to assist ESL/EAP (English for Academic Purposes) students' conversational language competence, one that will adequately support them in their academic studies.

Most of the research and literature on EAP is concerned with academic writing and reading and their importance in EAP curricula development. Very few (Burger and Chretien, 2001) involve academic discussion or conversation. This plays a large part of what international students do within their undergraduate or postgraduate studies, especially in class tutorials. If content-based learning facilitates important aspects of conversation this also has ramifications for testing, for example the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) exam, which uses general topics in the interview exam and possibly hinders or disadvantages students wanting to enter into

a foreign Anglo-phone speaking university. Moore and Morton (2005) found this problem between the writing styles required at university and that in the IELTS writing exam. This they feel inadequately disadvantages students trying to enter university as a foreign student; this could be the same for the speaking component.

A closely related study is Burger and Chretien (2001) who argue that receptive and productive skills are closely related; the improvement in the former enhances the latter. Their study concluded that through the use of written and oral practices from the exposure of the target language in readings and lectures oral proficiency gains were made. Obviously, exposure of language over a long period of time, 8 months of classes in Burger and Chretien (2001) case, language proficiency will increase. My argument is whether content-based learning facilitates both content specific and general topic conversations. And if there is a difference, what precisely does content-based learning facilitate. It would also be interesting to know what students' perceptions of content-based learning are on their speaking ability.

Unfortunately this study does not have strong links to existing research, the majority of interaction within the classroom is between teacher and students (Dashwood and Woods, 2006; Jalilifar and Shooshtari, 2011). As mentioned before little has been done on verbal communication and its need in EAP programs, most literature relies heavily on writing, reading and online discussions (Southard and Bates, 2006; August, 2004; Bauer et al, 2010).

(3) The Activity

For homework each week students were expected to listen to or read (depending on whether their class was listening or reading) one news item. A class activity involving every member was conducted weekly. Topics were expected to be “academic”, for example international or national news (political, business, social, historical etc.). The following websites were recommended:

- **bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learnenglish/**
- **bbc.co.uk/**
- **cnn.com/**
- **www.voanews.com/specialenglish/**
- **vaonews.com/english/**
- **smh.com.au**
- **abc.net.au/news/feeds/**
- **guardian.co.uk/**
- **breakingnewsenglish.com/**

NOTE: The ones in **bold letters** are for ESL learners

For the listening classes students were expected to take/make notes as they listened, writing paragraphs or sentences was not accepted. They were encouraged to listen to the item a number of times. Students were also expected to bring these notes to class with the items title and website address. In the second week of classes students were allocated one class to demonstrate the procedure and participate in this activity. Every

week the homework was checked to make sure it was appropriate and completed according to the requirements.

For the reading classes, students were required to read an article from one of the above sites or from their own source, for no more than 20 minutes. After reading, students were to review what they had read and write at least 6 collocations from what they had read in the same order. The collocations had to be between 2 to 4 words. Students had to print or copy the article and bring it and the collocations to class. Once again students were demonstrated the procedure in week 2 and were monitored weekly to make sure they were following the correct procedure.

Each week 2 students were nominated to present their news stories. In the reading class these 2 students would write the title of the item and the collocations on the board. The listening class students were only required to write the title on the board. The other class members in groups had to discuss the titles on the board and try and guess or tell the story. After, various groups were selected to give their perception of story; this was used as a pre-listening activity. The two nominated students then had to attempt to retell the items either using only the collocations for reading or only the notes for listening. Students and teacher asked questions to clarify information and gain a greater understanding. Once this had finished, each student in their groups also retold their news articles. This process took about 30 minutes and was conducted for 13 weeks.

Students kept all their articles, notes and collocations in a portfolio. They were asked to bring to every class and it was marked 3 times during the semester. They were also evaluated in various forms on the content of these stories. For example, students participated in discussion or writing exams, depending on the requirement of the course.

(4) Methodology

(4.1) Context and Participants

This research was conducted at a Japanese university that specializes in international studies. All participants were studying in the Faculty of International relations and are required to undertake English lessons as part of their degree. Students, even though selected in the highest levels for their majors, varied in levels, the majority from TOIEC 400 to 550. This, however, didn't indicate their speaking ability. Three of the classes were first year students, two of which were reading classes and the other a listening class, all classes having between 24 to 33 students. The final was a Communication Strategies class with 14 second year students whose TOIEC scores were on average higher, ranging from 500 to 750.

(4.2) Research Design

A questionnaire was distributed to students at the end of the semester, it contained 12 statements (see appendix 1) regarding their perception of the activity. The questionnaire statements were translated into Japanese to eliminate any confusion that students might have with them, especially those at lower levels. Participants responded to the statements on a six-point bipolar scale (Strongly agree, agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree, disagree, strongly disagree). The questionnaire was administered in the last week of classes; students were unable to discuss answers with fellow classmates, however they were under no obligation to participate. No names or student numbers were required on the questionnaire.

Of the 106 students who participated in the activity 99 completed the questionnaire, 7, for various reasons, were unable to answer.

(5) Results

Table 1. Number of Statements Answered

Answers	S.1	S.2	S.3	S.4	S.5	S.6	S.7	S.8	S.9	S.10	S.11	S.12
1's	0	2	0	3	7	2	1	0	1	1	4	0
2's	3	3	1	2	19	6	0	1	1	5	6	4
3's	0	12	2	22	47	40	9	6	4	16	15	16
4's	8	39	17	41	18	28	40	28	28	36	47	41
5's	41	32	37	24	5	16	36	36	43	30	25	27
6's	48	10	41	6	2	6	12	27	21	10	1	10

The above table indicates the number of students who selected each answer for the twelve statements. The answers are shown along the side and the statements up the top.

Table 2. Percentage of Statements Answered

Answers	S.1	S.2	S.3	S.4	S.5	S.6	S.7	S.8	S.9	S.10	S.11	S.12
1's	0	2	0	3.1	7.1	2	1	0	1	1	4.1	0
2's	3.1	3.1	1	2	19.4	6.1	0	1	1	5.1	6.1	4.1
3's	0	12.2	2	22.4	48	40.8	9.2	6.1	4.1	16.3	15.3	16.3
4's	8.2	39.8	17.30	41.8	18.4	28.6	40.8	28.6	28.6	36.7	48	41.8
5's	41.8	32.70	37.8	24.5	5.1	16.3	36.7	36.7	43.9	30.6	25.5	27.6
6's	49	10.2	41.8	6.1	2	6.1	12.2	27.6	21.4	10.2	1	10.2

This table shows the percentage of students' answers for each statement. Once again the answers are in the left column and the statements are in the top row.

Table 3. Mean and Standard Deviation of the Statements Answered

Answers	S.1	S.2	S.3	S.4	S.5	S.6	S.7	S.8	S.9	S.10	S.11	S.12
Mean	5.378	4.286	5.173	4.010	3.010	3.694	4.490	4.837	4.776	4.214	3.876	4.235
St. Dev.	0.725	1.045	0.862	1.040	1.030	1.078	0.9	0.938	0.936	1.067	1.028	0.982

The final table shows the mean of the answers for each statement and the standard deviation. The middle row being the mean and the bottom row being the standard deviation.

(6) Discussion

In the first statement students were asked to give their view on the usefulness of the activity for language learners. Of all the statements this one had the most positive results, with 41.8% and 49% of answers for agree (5) and strongly agree (6) respectively. 49% for strongly agree was the highest percentage for any answer in the questionnaire. This statement was supported by statement 3 which asked whether participating in this activity was a good way of learning English. Once again a high percentage of students selected strongly agree

(41.8%) and agree (37.8%), this statement had the second highest mean of 5.173 and the second lowest standard deviation (0.862), indicating once again that there wasn't a large variation in scores. As a matter of fact, of the 98 students who participated in the activity 3% gave a negative agreement answer. These arguments surely indicate a strong belief by students that the weekly news homework and class exercise that follows it are a useful educational task-based activity for language learners.

The aspects of language learning that students felt this activity was most useful might be answered in other various statements. For example, in statements 4, 7 and 11 students on averaged agreed, 4.010, 4.490 and 4.214 respectively. Statement 4, which asked if students thought the activity made it easier for them to speak in English, and statement 10, asking whether they are better at telling stories in English; both scored in the low tend to agree. Both these statements have higher standard deviations in comparison to other questions, showing a variation in answers. These, even though on average have positive answers, do not strongly indicate why students thought the activity was useful and a good way of learning English, as discussed in the previous paragraph.

A better indication might come from statement 8. This statement asked whether students learned about cultures of the world from the weekly news activity. This answer had the third highest average at 4.837, and like statements 1 and 3 had a low standard deviation. As can be seen in Table 2, only 6.1% of participants answered in the disagree section of the scale. This information is elaborated by statement 9 which asked if students are more interested in learning about foreign countries after participating in this weekly exercise. Almost identical scores are shown, as seen in tables 1, 2 and 3. From this a conclusion could be drawn that students felt the task-based activity was useful to language learners and a good way of learning English because of the content they learnt or researched during it. To a lesser extent the language skills they gain were not as important or influenced by the exercise. Dornyei and Csizer(1998) suggest that using authentic material and exposing students to the culture of the second language is highly important. Surely the weekly news homework achieved this, evidently shown in the results of statements 8 and 9.

Another reason why students strongly felt that the activity was useful and a good way of learning English could be because students had the freedom of choice to select their own topics, the majority selecting the ones they were interested in; this hopefully creating some form of learner autonomy. Jones (2001) recommends autonomy as a desirable goal in language learning. This can be assisted by CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) (Little, 1996; Jones, 2001); the weekly news activity is an ideal example. Students were asked if they would continue on with this content-learning task-based activity. Just over 20% of students disagreed with this statement, however the majority agreed. Although most of these students selected tend to agree, hopefully a large amount will continue. Dornyei and Csizer (1998) emphasis a link between motivation and learner autonomy, maybe the high percentage of motivated students who intend to continue were influenced by this autonomous learning task.

There were some discouraging results from the questionnaire as well. Students had to communicate their items in a structured method, either using their notes or the collocations. This might have restricted students' fluency, one point that showed up in the questionnaire. For statement 11, did the exercise improve English fluency; only 1% chose strongly agree. It's a little difficult to concretely conclude on the mean of this statement as the

majority of the answers are in the agree section of the scale. However, the mean of the all answers is 3.876, which is in the tend-to-disagree section. This indicates a variation in scores; which would signify the need for further research on this topic. For example, to find out if the level of the student affects their fluency during this activity, or if a particular activity, note taking or collocations, affects the students' fluency more than the other one.

(7) Conclusion

In summary, students' perception of a weekly news task-based activity that was set as homework and completed in classes was generally positive. As suggested, students seemed to get the most out of the content learning from the exercise, more so than the language skill effects. As mentioned, this would indicate a greater need to incorporate content into the language class in Japanese universities. Content that emphasizes foreign cultures or topics and is chosen by the students themselves. There is a need to improve or investigate the weekly news activity further to enhance its ability to promote students' fluency. Whether this involves adapting it to different levels, using less structure in the spoken component or only using the note taking or collocations activity needs to be further investigated.

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Appendix 1.

Questionnaire Statements

1. I think doing the weekly news activity for homework is a useful activity for language learners.
2. I enjoy doing the weekly news activity.
3. I think participating in the weekly news activity is a good way of learning English.
4. The weekly news activity helped make it easier for me to speak in English.
5. Participating in the activity caused me stress.
6. I would have liked the lessons to include different kinds of activities after doing the homework.
7. The weekly news activity enlarged my vocabulary.
8. I learned about cultures of the world from the weekly news activity.
9. I am more interested in learning about other foreign countries after participating in the weekly news activities.
10. I'm better at telling a story in English after taking this class.
11. The weekly news activity lessons helped me to improve my English fluency.
12. I will continue doing this activity to learn English after the semester.