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## **Small Group Work and Second Language Learning Among Japanese Learners of English**

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### **Introduction**

Japan is a country in which entrance examinations control education. The influence of these examinations on both the educational system as a whole, and the day-to-day content of classroom teaching is overwhelming (Buck 1988, p. 16). Besides the heavy emphasis on grammar, the majority of Japanese language classes are teacher-fronted, and the maximum number of students in one class as set by Ministry of Education is still 40. The majority of teachers are non-native speakers (NNS) of English. However, as far as conversation is concerned, it is still widely believed in Japan that input must come from native speakers (NS) of English only.

In such an environment, how can language teachers lead students to communicate meaningfully and enhance students' communicative competence in English so that after they graduate from college or the university they will be able to use English in the real world?

In order to make this possible, many researchers claim that one of the most promising ways to facilitate second language acquisition in contexts where there is a widespread shortage of native speakers is to use small group work that encourages two-way interactions among students. Until recently learner-learner interactions were believed to slow down the acquisition process because of the potential ungrammatical models that learners use for communication. Aston (1986), for instance, found that some second language (L2) learners accept interlanguage forms when speaking

with other L2 learners. Pica & Doughty (1985) support this idea by saying that if group activities are used steadily, input may be restricted to a nontarget variety. Ellis (1984) goes even farther by saying that group work allows the possibility of fossilization. Another objection, which Pica (1987) points out is that the more talkative students monopolize the interaction and have a lot of influence on a decision that a group is supposed to come up with.

From the cultural point of view, it is reported that in multicultural groups, Asian students tend to be more submissive, anxious, less talkative, and give fewer suggestions and information (Webb, 1982).

On the other hand, a number of studies have shown that group work greatly enhances the learners' communicative use without resulting in fossilized L2 learning. Taylor (1987), for example, indicates that small groups provide language learners with many and varied opportunities to interact directly with the target language. It is suggested that only through interaction can students achieve facility in using a language, and that interaction seldom occurs in the teacher-directed and teacher dominated classrooms (Rivers, 1986; McGroarty, 1991; DeVillar, 1990; Omaggio, 1986).

A study by Long and Porter (1985) shows that group work increases language practice opportunities which in turn improves the quality of student talk. They claim that in the classroom, if the instruction is teacher-fronted, genuine conversation rarely takes place. Omaggio (1986) states that talking in a group creates information gaps, which resembles what occurs in natural conversation. Rulon and McCreary (1986) support this claim saying that the relatively stress-free situations in group work provides students with more opportunity for negotiation of meanings.

Porter's (1986) study shows that there were no significant differences between learners who interacted with NSs or NNSs in the accuracy of their speech production. It did not show any clear advantage of having a native speaker as an input provider or phonological problems in learner-learner interaction. Porter suggests, therefore, that teachers need not worry about learners picking up ungrammatical input or miscorrecting each other.

In other words, given the opportunity to negotiate new input, both NSs and NNSs modify their speech. For example, in group work, NS and NNS adjust their talk so that learners can decide the size of chunks they want to operate with, make topics salient by moving them to the front, use simpler vocabulary, speak slower, and ask more clarification questions, repeating

and rephrasing what they say (Long & Porter, 1985; Doughty & Pica, 1986; Gass & Varonis, 1985, Pica, 1991; Pica & Doughty, 1985, Bygate, 1988; Rulon & McCrealy, 1986).

Kinginger and Savignon (1991) caution, however, that if interactions are form-centered, learners are in effect practicing the same discourse patterns as in traditional teacher-centered lessons, and that it is not clear that such interactions will help students learn to negotiate meanings (p.88). They suggest, however, if classroom discussions are clearly message-oriented, the cues for interacting came about spontaneously as a result of involvement in real relationships (Kinginger & Savignon, p. 89).

Yet the question remains. If a form-focused task is the same practicing pattern as teacher-fronted instruction, as Kinginger and Savignon claim, will Japanese learners of English who have had little or no experience in group work perform the same way as learners in their experiment? In other words, will they produce more words, more communication units, longer sentences, and ask for more clarification requests?

### **Method**

The questions to be investigated are as follows: Is there a notable difference in (a) number of utterances, (b) communication units, and (c) clarification requests produced when students work in form-oriented small groups and when they work in content-oriented small groups? If there is no difference, then the task may have no effect on language use of Japanese learners of English in the classroom. However, if there is a difference, then the task may have an effect and Japanese learners can benefit from it. A communication (C-units) is defined by Chaudron (1988) as "an independent grammatical predication: the same as a T-unit, except that in oral language, elliptical answers to questions also constitute complete predications" (p. 45). T unit is defined as a main clause and related subordinate clauses and nonclausal structures embedded in it. (See Note 1).

### **Participants**

The subjects are six Japanese students currently enrolled in American Language Culture Program (ALCP) at Arizona State University. Three beginning level students are in Group I and three intermediate students are in Group II. Their proficiency was measured by the University of Michigan

English Placement Test. Their TOEFL scores range from 377 to 475. Before the tasks are given, a background questionnaire is conducted (See Table 1 on the next page and Appendix A). The nature of group-work was explained prior to the questionnaire. The same subjects are used for Task 1 and Task 2.

**Tasks**

**Task 1**      Focus on Form

Each group contains three participants. One of the participants, the informer, is given a picture to describe to a second learner, the reconstructor, without letting the learner see it. The reconstructor's task is to attempt to reconstruct the picture. In doing so, he/she is free to ask clarification requests and to ask any kind of questions in the target language. The third learner, the monitor,

**Table 1**

Background Information on Ss

Ss	Age	sex	time in U.S.	English in Japan	Group work experience
-----					
beginning level					
1	18	M	4 mos	6 yrs	none
2	18	M	3	6	none
3	18	F	3	6	none
intermediate level					
4	20	M	3	6 2*	none yes
5	19	M	3	7	very little
6	20	F	3	6 2**	none yes

\* at the language institute

\*\* junior college

checks the accuracy of the conversation between the first and second learners and corrects their utterances immediately if there are any grammatical errors. The monitor is also allowed to help the first learner to give information to the second learner. The teacher is also present during this task. The time limit is 10 minutes.

**Task 2** Focus on Content

First, learners are to select a subject they would like to talk about among three given topics which are (1) your future life (2) Future in Japan (3) Future in the world. Without the presence of an instructor or a teacher, learners are encouraged to provide each other with information, ask questions and clarification requests, but no particular outcome is expected. The time limit is 10 minutes. The learners are given Task 1 first with the picture (see Appendix B).

**Data collection and analysis**

The quantitative analysis included (1) counts of words during the first five minutes, (2) counts of communication units (c-units), and (3) counts and descriptions of clarification requests. For each task, subjects are tape recorded for ten minutes and the first 5 minutes of each tape is transcribed and analyzed.

**Results and Discussion**

After a general introductory discussion of the tasks, the discussion section will be divided into three major parts, the aims of which are (1) to compare Task 1 and Task 2 within the same level of proficiency, (2) to compare the differences of these two tasks between the beginning and intermediate proficiency levels.

Before continuing, I would like to explain the method I used for counting words and clarification requests.

Total words: The number of completed words during the first five minutes was counted per student. Japanese words inserted in the discourse and false starts such as ah, eh (in either language) were not considered in the word count.

Clarification requests: Clarification requests include direct information-question words (what, where, how,

why, and when) and repeated words or utterances.  
(Gass & Varonis, 1985)

Communication units: Any sentences satisfying the  
definition by Chaudron (1988) were counted.

**I. Differences Between Task 1 and Task 2 for Beginning Students**

The aim of this section is to compare how the learners' utterances change  
from form-focused task (Task 1) to the content-focused task (Task 2).

In example (1) provided below, J is the informer, Y is the picture  
reconstructor and E is the student monitor. Example (1) shows their  
utterances in Task 1 and Example (2) exemplifies utterances taken from Task  
2.

Example (1) J: informer Y: reconstructor E monitor

- a) J: Dog is going to, to, across street.  
Y: Right or left or which street, where?  
J: Center.  
b) Y: Sports car?  
E: Right lane.  
Y: Sports car, crash.

Example (2)

- Y: Where do you want to stay living, in Japan, American or  
another country?  
J: I want to stay in California near the Hollywood.  
Y: Hollywood?  
J: Hollywood.  
E: What would you like to do your future?  
Y: I wanna go to university.

Now, the differences within the beginning proficiency level in terms of  
counts of (1) words, (2) communication units, and (3) clarification requests  
will be examined.

**Table 2**

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Number of words of beginning level subjects				
J	Y	E	total	

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Task	1	51	52	9	112
Task	2	41	99	78	218

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J: informer      Y: picture reconstructor      E: monitor

Throughout Task 1, subjects were eager to give or receive information and reconstruct the picture. Sometimes they seemed to put too much attention on drawing rather than on utterances. It is clear from Table 2 that in the content-focused task (Task 2) learners produced almost twice as large a number of words without grammar checks or without the teacher being present. Also it was surprising that subjects did not use their native language except in the first three sentences and one technological term in Task 2.

**Table 3**

Number of communication units for beginning level					
		J	Y	E	total
Task	1	5	2	1	8
Task	2	4	12	12	28

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J: informer      Y: picture reconstructor      E: monitor

As for the number of communication units for beginning level subjects, due to the nature of Task 1 even the longest sentences had only 5 words. Most of the sentences are very simple. Task 2 consisted of longer and more complex words and structures.

**Table 4**

		Number of clarification requests for beginning level subject			
		J	Y	E	total
Task	1	1	7	2	10
Task	2	0	1	0	1

J: informer      Y: picture reconstructor      E: monitor

Y had to make clarification requests the most to reconstruct the picture clearly but in Task 2, the learners did not have to negotiate their meanings to achieve a certain goal.

For the intermediate students, Task 1 and Task 2 were done in the same procedure. Example (3) shows their utterances in Task 1 and example (4) exemplifies utterances taken from Task 2.

Example (3)

- a) F: Up to down the road, two women are walking on the road.  
N: Upper?  
F: Upper.

Example (4)

- P: How about you?  
N: Me?  
F: You wanna employ? (be employed)  
N: I don't know yet, but anyway I'd like to go to university in the US and, so, I don't know yet.

Here, differences in counts of (1) words, (2) communication units, (3) clarification requests are investigated in Experiment I.

**Table 5**

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Number of words of intermediate level students

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		F	N	S	total
Task	1	97	16	25	138
Task	2	150	112	108	365

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F: informer      N: picture reconstructor      S: monitor

In terms of number of words, the difference between Task 1 and Task 2 is substantial once again, with task 2 generating more than double the words as Task 1. In Task 1, F was an informer and N was a picture reconstructor, and consequently F produced the most words and N the least. Though F was outgoing and tended to talk the most, they all took turns and talked eagerly to find- out about each other's future without the teacher being present.

**Table 6**

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Number of C-units for intermediate level students

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		F	N	S	total
Task	1	8	0	2	10
Task	2	17	13	9	39

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F: informer      N: picture reconstructor      S: monitor

In terms of number of C-units, possibly due to the nature of the picture reconstruction task, in Task 1 learners used shorter sentences, sometimes only one or two words to give information to the interlocutor. In Task 2,

however, it seemed that students really wanted to know what each of them would like to do in the future. F had 12 words, S had 11 words, and N had 9 words in their longest sentences.

Clarification requests

In Task 1, N, the picture reconstructor, was the only one who made a clarification request four times. N simply repeated the informer's utterances. In Task 2, no clarification requests were recorded.

**II. Differences Between the Beginning and Intermediate Levels**

Differences between the two levels are analyzed in terms of (1) words, (2) communication units, (3) clarification.

**Table 7**

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Comparison of number of words between  
beginning and intermediate level subjects

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	Informer	Reconstructor			Monitor
		J	Y	E	total
Beginning level	Task 1	51	52	9	112
	Task 2	41	99	78	218
Intermediate level	Task 1	97	16	25	138
	Task 2	150	112	103	365

---

As shown, the difference between beginning and intermediate levels in Task 1 is not much, probably on account of the nature of a task itself. Since task 1 is a one-way picture reconstructing task, it can mean material is restricted and consequently vocabulary use is limited. However, in Task 2, the

difference is notable. At the beginning level, Y took the role of a leader and encouraged the other two to speak up. When the flow of conversation was discontinued, he suggested in Japanese what they could say in order to keep their conversation going because the tape recorder was running. Yet, they seemed to have difficulty maintaining the conversation. On the other hand, in the intermediate group, when there was a pause, one learner asked a question in English and encouraged the others to speak up. They said such sentences as "How about you?" or "What would you like to be, N?" In both groups, learners produced more utterances in Task 2, although at the beginning level, the difference was small. My hypothesis is that learners produce more utterances when they are not focusing on form, although the difference is not so great. My hypothesis may be sustained. However, we have to note that there is more than one difference between these tasks. One is that focus on forms vs. on content and the other is one-way information flow vs. free personal conversation.

**Table 8**

Comparison of number of C-units between beginning and intermediate level subjects					
	Informer	Reconstructor			Monitor
		J	Y	E	total
Beginning level	Task 1	5	2	1	8
	Task 2	4	12	12	28
Intermediate level	Task 1	8	0	2	10
	Task 2	17	13	9	39

In terms of C-units, when beginning and intermediate learners are compared in Task 1, the difference is less marked owing to the nature of Task 1; that the picture limits the vocabulary use of the learners. In Task 2 the difference favors the intermediate group.

But the main difference is that in the beginning group, subjects spoke more slowly, took more time to think and say sentences. After each took turns in mentioning their future plans, it seemed hard for them to continue. On the other hand in the intermediate group, once one learner started talking, there were few pauses in the conversation. Since they were all concerned about their futures, their topics reflected this. For example, they were all eager to know each other's plans after their intensive English program. Also, one male student asked a female student about her view on marriage. However, there may rise a question that what would happen in this task if they were asked to focus on form. At this point, we would not know which factor would be stronger, need to monitor or personal interest. Certain roles were taken by each student spontaneously. E in the beginning group and N in the intermediate are females. E had a tendency to be shy, but N did not. But in Task 1, N did not produce any C-units. The reason is that since N was a picture reconstructor, she repeated the words of the information giver in Task 1. However in Task 2 she took a leader role as Y in the beginning group trying to get S to talk more. Even though the data appears to reflect that N talked very little for Task 1, N carried on an extensive conversation with F in the latter part of Task 1 which does not show up in data.

**Table 9**

Comparison of number of clarification requests between beginning and intermediate level subjects					
	Informer	Reconstructor			Monitor total
		J	Y	E	
Beginning level	Task 1	1	7	2	10
	Task 2	0	1	0	1
Intermediate level	Task 1	0	4	0	4
	Task 2	0	0	0	0

Contrary to the findings by Doughty and Pica (1986), the subjects at both levels had more clarification requests in Task 1, the form-focused task. This is probably due to the fact that in tasks such as task 2 where learners do not have to achieve a specific goal together, interactional modifications do not occur as often as in tasks with specific goals.

These findings regarding effectiveness of group work on Japanese learners of English suggest that learners indeed produced more words and communication units in content-focused tasks and that task order had no obvious effect on the outcome. On the other hand, clarification requests, which are claimed to be crucial for second language acquisition since modified interaction is proved to lead to increased talk among students, did not occur much either in Task 1 nor Task 2. In sum, the content-focused task had more effect on the Japanese learners of English than form-focused task.

### **Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications**

The major focus of this study was to show that Japanese learners of English may be able to benefit from small group work and if learners are given form-focused and content-focused tasks, learners may benefit more from content-focused tasks.

For the Japanese students who had little or no experience with group work, the picture reconstruction work was adopted, expecting that they would produce longer and more complex sentences, but the results showed otherwise. Although the monitor did not seem to have the ability to check the other learners' grammaticality, the mere idea of having a student monitor check grammar and having a teacher present might have made a difference. In Task 2, where there was no person to check grammar and where no teacher was present, the learners produced almost twice as many words and communication units. Their utterances were longer, more complex, and accurate with almost no grammatical errors.

On the other hand, clarification requests, which are claimed to be crucial for second language acquisition since modified interaction is proved to lead to increased talk among students, did not occur much either in Task 1 nor Task 2. The reason may be that due to the nature of tasks, learners did not have to achieve a specific task together. In other words, there was no reason to check for clarification. To summarize, this pilot study has demonstrated that Japanese learners of English indeed produced more

words and communication units in content-focused tasks than in form-focused tasks.

### Implications

If we want learners to communicate, it is clear that group work is one tool to facilitate their language use. Learners themselves, after being in the States for four months, realized how important it was to have speaking ability and how much they did not have that kind of practice in Japan. It is interesting to note that the subjects themselves are talking about this in the experiment as seen in the following example.

N:- Japanese school is so so stupid. I mean in English class we just learn grammar or something writing or reading. So we don't say, we don't speak anything, It's too bored, I think,so it's too boring.

S: Yeah.

F: Yeah. So I wish next generation, children will study speaking.

Adopting small group work in Japanese language classes will require careful consideration and planning. Some teachers may worry that students might start speaking in Japanese during group work or pick up ungrammatical forms. However, Porter (1986) suggests, "pedagogically, the findings on input provide evidence that teachers need not be concerned about learners picking up each others' errors or miscorrecting each other." Despite all the limitations, group work is still worth trying for the Japanese teachers of English.

Since this is a small-scale pilot study, there are certain limitations to it. For example, there is more than one difference between these tasks. In addition to the difference between a focus on form vs. a focus on content, there is a difference between one-way information flow vs. free personal conversation. If learners were to do Task 1 (one-way information) in two conditions: one with a focus on form and the other with a focus on content, and Task 2 (free personal conversation) with a focus on form and a focus on content, the outcome may be different. Future investigation will be necessary in this area. Also, as previously stated, the learners were given tasks that did not require learners to achieve a specific goal. A further study might follow Pica's recommendation (1987) that the use of exchange activities, such as jigsaw activities, will produce more interactional modifications.

Despite the limitation of this study, the data has shown, among other things, that group work may enhance learners communicative use and may fulfill learners' needs and motivations more than teacher-fronted instruction, and Japanese learners of English may be able to benefit from group work.

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#### Note

1. Definition by Hunt (1970) in Pica & Doughty (1985).

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## Appendix A

### Background questionnaire

Name

Age

School or institution you last attended

How long have you studied English?

What kind of instruction have you mainly had?

1. grammar
2. reading and writing
3. conversation

Have you experienced group work?

1. Yes
2. No

If Yes, how often?

1. Very often
2. Sometimes
3. Once in a while
4. Very little

Do you think group work is helpful in learning English in Japan?

1. Yes, very much.
2. To a certain degree
3. Not so much

Any comments, opinions?

**Appendix B**