

Second-Language Learning Tasks and Student-Teacher Negotiations A Case Study in Japanese College Students

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Introduction

Many scholars of language teaching, as well as instructors and students unanimously agree that in order to master a language one must learn to converse in it. An extensive literature exists in support of this idea. How can it be actually put into practice in the English teaching-learning environment in the Japanese education system? What types of negotiations are conducted between teachers and learners in the classroom to promote second-language acquisition (SLA)?

Students who enroll in universities and colleges in Japan have already had 6 years of English in high school, usually through one or both of two major teaching-learning methods :

1. The translation approach using a textbook with stories.

The use of stories is the traditionally preferred method of introducing students to a foreign language in Japanese high schools. By translating words and parsing sentences from the stories, students learn how meanings are conveyed in that language. Rote memorization of grammar is said to have fallen out of favor in most schools. Japanese English language educators reason that recent Japanese English textbooks for high schools are being written based on the principle that a language should be taught principally in a verbal context rather than in mastering grammatical rules as in the traditional way. With regard to content, since a growing percentage of teenage students exhibit little interest in current affairs or even bother watching news programs, textbook writers and publishers have put the emphasis mostly on true stories designed to build vocabulary and introduce key language structures. The writers hope that while learning a foreign language, the stories will also serve to broaden the students' knowledge of world affairs. A second related goal is to increase their knowledge of their native language by a comparative study of foreign language grammar. Teachers who adopt this approach, lead all learning activities, not giving much opportunity for students to do creative individual, pair- or group-work and presentation of results.

2. Combination of the translation approach with English conversation exercises.

A growing number of English high school teachers, aware of the need to habituate their students to speaking a second language, are combining the above method with exercises in English conversation. With the cooperation of native and trained foreign Assistant Teachers (ATs), today's high school students learn and practice listening and speaking skills through dialog memorization, role-playing, pattern drills, songs, games, and other activities. In this approach, classes become less teacher-centered, allowing students to perform more as individual learners in the sole, pair and group activities.

Given that the above (1, 2) two teaching-learning methods are the background of the students, I wished to learn in my case study, what student-teacher learning interaction changes would occur in my actual class environment if learning materials were supplemented and students were given the opportunity to be more the center of their language acquisition process. I thus conducted a one-semester (16 weeks) investigation with a class of non-English majors, both female and male freshman. I selected a course where more than 80 percent of the students were freshman, as I was curious to obtain direct feedback from students fresh out of high school. Since my students were from six different majors, most of them had rarely if ever met each other except for this one subject. This suited me perfectly since most students would not be distracted by old friends or would be unlikely to make new ones. I looked forward to experiencing a straight student-teacher relationship in a close to bias-free environment. Academically, the students were not screened according to their English level and during the course were going to practice the 4 English skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) .

The framework for my investigation was the interaction understood and depicted in the figure proposed by Long (1985) . Theoretical work and literature explaining the importance of interaction on the acquisition of a second language emerged in the 1980s

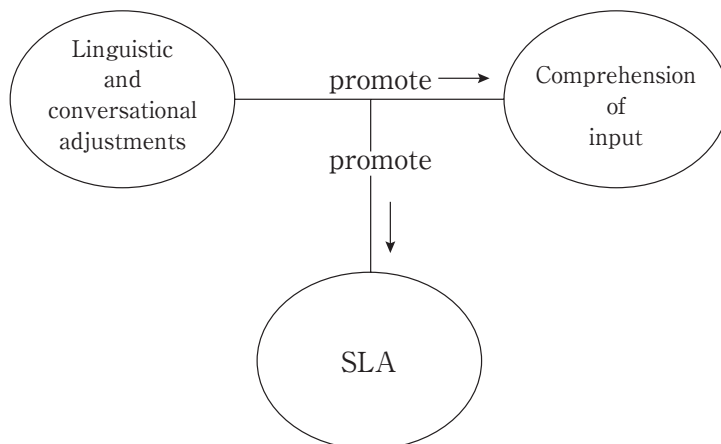


Figure1 : Interaction framework in SLA (adapted from Long 1985) .

with Krashen (1982) arguing the importance of input in several studies, and Long (1985) elaborating a theoretical framework that led to a large number of empirical studies. The latter's studies provided evidence for the relationship of linguistic and conversational adjustments and input that promotes second-language acquisition (SLA) .

Method

With this framework as the basis, my aim was to examine the interaction of these components in an SLA environment. The investigation followed a three-step learning process for a period of 16 weeks.

STEP ONE: WEEKS: 1 – 4

Class learning approaches

In our first class meeting a detailed syllabus was distributed to students covering course objectives, ground rules, and basic classroom and behavioral procedures. In that meeting, twenty-one female and seven male students were assessed as to their expectations for the course and their likes and dislikes regarding English language learning. The following questions were given with multiple choice answers.

1. Do you like learning English?
2. Do you think it is easy or difficult?
3. What is easy? What is difficult?
4. When you must speak in English, how do you feel?
5. What do you like best about English lessons?
6. What do you dislike about English lessons?

They were then asked to sit two by two in groups of four.

The first and third meetings were *more teacher-centered*. I presented the learning materials (text, exercises) , and the students were instructed to conduct their study under my lead.

In the second and fourth classes, I shifted to *more learner-centered* activities, providing a framework for students to build their own knowledge from what they already knew on to new active learning. I thus presented the learning materials(text, exercises), and proposed projects that asked for pair-work, group-work to complete the tasks or make a presentation possible. At the end of the fourth class meeting, the students were assessed for the second time. A questionnaire was given to critique the four completed classes. Multiple choice answers were provided with these questions.

1. Which type of class do you feel more comfortable working in?
With the teacher alone leading all activities the whole class?
2. How do you like to study English in the classroom? Alone?
3. What do you want to learn in this course?

4. Please put in writing any requests or suggestions you might have.

To preserve privacy, the students were asked to sit in rows leaving an empty seat between them. With regard to number 4, one student replied that she was not good at oral skill activities. Pair-work was not very familiar to her since she had done it only a few times in high school. She needed and wanted much time for practice before making a presentation in front of the students. She admitted to feeling somewhat uncomfortable with the student she was paired with, who was not as eager to practice as she was. But she was quite willing to commit herself to hard work to improve her conversational skills. Personal comments like this were unusual in the investigation questionnaires I had collected in my previous studies. Interestingly, this example shows that while Japanese students are becoming more assertive, by the same token it indicates they want closer screening when being assigned group activities. College teachers today must be more ready to deal with emotionally oversensitive Japanese students, unable to adjust to sudden new situations, such as working with different and or new classmates in learning settings. The reportedly increasing number of students seeking counseling help in colleges and universities reflects the situation I encountered in this particular class, not to mention more critical ones I found in other classes.

Self-assessment questionnaires like these are helpful and important for my lessons as they provide information on any necessary student re-grouping as well as measures to create a better social learning atmosphere. They also keep the teacher informed of tasks individual students wish to tackle, the problems they encounter in language learning, and the tasks some are intimidated by. Lastly, they serve as efficient sources of a collective view of what students would like to do in the coming course.

STEP TWO: WEEKS: 5 – 12

A. Student guidelines

Students were instructed on the following classroom and learning behavior.

No Japanese. This rule was negotiated with my students. No Japanese allowed when talking to the teacher. No Japanese should be spoken among students when they are actually engaged in activities. No conversation permitted when the teacher or a student is speaking, an audiotape or a videotape is playing. Before making these rules I had to ensure that the students had sufficient language skills to be able to function entirely in English. The students were given “Classroom Language” sheets with common phrases such as :“Pardon!”...“Could you repeat that, please?”...“Could you read that again?” ... “Could you play that again?” ... “Just a minute!” ... “Did you get it?” ... “Yes, I got it.”

Names. Students should learn their classmates' names. In the interim, I instructed them to wear name cards.

Dictionaries. Although I have found that excessive reliance on dictionaries in the classroom tends to work against student participation, since I did not wish to impose too many restrictions from the very beginning, I did not make an issue of it.

Participation and cooperation. Students were told to work together as much as possible.

B. Learning activities and student guidance

From weeks 5 to 12, students conducted the following activities for a period of two months, while bearing in mind the learning behavior instructions. Class orientation alternated, with one week *mostly teacher-centered*, and the following week *largely student-centered*. Tasks involved solo, pair-work and group-work. By week 9, students were comfortable performing the assigned activities and tasks. The detailed description of classroom activities shows how students were instructed and encouraged to be more centers of the learning process.

Writing activities

Learners were instructed to keep a weekly journal in English of 40 to 50 words regarding a topic of their choice. The activity was to be done outside of class. A sample was provided. When doing the task, they were to remember the following :

- Keeping a journal helps me develop the habit of thinking in English and the fluency to express myself.
- I need not check out every single word or phrase I write.
- Language and grammatical mistakes, after all, are to be expected during the learning process. My mistakes are a normal part element of the learning process.
- I should double-space and date my journal.
- Content can be whatever: about the previous weekend; a social event like a party, dinner with friends; an old or new experience in the neighborhood; a current event in Japan or abroad; someone in my family member, friend or pet; my comments on a film, a favorite TV program, a recommended restaurant; my future plan, etc.
- I should keep my journal together in a binder or a notebook.
- I should underline key words or phrases I learn from the dictionary.

Listening activities

(1) Regarding the weekly journal, students were instructed to:

- Gather in groups of 4, or at least 3 students to listen to what a group member wrote in the weekly journal. Not look around or read, just listen.
- If the meaning was not clear, request a repetition.

(2) Regarding stories in the textbook, students were asked to:

- Explain the story. Answer the comprehension questions without reading from

the textbook.

- Look only at the 8-strip pictures that accompany the story. Answer the comprehension questions without consulting the textbook.

Reading activities

Regarding stories in the textbook, students were told to:

- Keep textbooks closed when instructed to do so. Since the reading passage themes lie within the students' realm of experience, warm-up questions would be asked to elicit some kind of answer.
- Read aloud under the guidance of the teacher. Articulate the sounds carefully. Follow the teacher's stress and intonation, mimicking them as closely as possible.
- Long and/or new words should be pronounced slowly and carefully, putting the accent on the proper part of the word. (The correct term, "syllable," was avoided in the first 3 weeks of class.)

Speaking activities

(1) Regarding the weekly journal, the students were instructed to:

- Ask one's conversation partner for clarification when unable to understand the report for any reason. Students should try asking details of what was reported. Short and simple questions are preferable. Examples were given, such as, "Do you like...?," "When do you usually meet your friend?," "Will you go there again?" I encouraged students to start by asking yes-or-no questions. Then, move on to questions starting with "when," "where," "how," etc.
- All asked questions should be answered.

(2) Regarding the stories in the textbook, students had to:

- Cover the story text. Retell the story looking only at the pictures, key words and expressions the teacher might write on the blackboard.

(3) Supplemental topic-based question interview handouts were provided.

Students should :

- Never look at the written questions the conversation partner is reading.

(4) Supplemental discussion topics were provided. Students were encouraged to:

- Frankly state their opinions and feelings about the topic theme. Not worry too much about making grammatical mistakes as making mistakes is how people learn. They should just try their best to express themselves.

In summary, the basic learning material used in this investigation was the textbook, supplemental materials were the weekly journals created by students, while topic-based question interview handouts and discussion topics were provided by the teacher.

STEP THREE: WEEKS: 13—16

Task types and student-teacher interaction analysis

In accomplishing the learning tasks described in Step Two, students and the teacher were in constant interaction. For a reference on how task type variables would influence student-teacher interaction, I reviewed the studies conducted by Pica and Doughty (1985), who were particularly interested in the shift from teacher-centered classrooms to more learner-centered classrooms using student group-work and pair-work. Pica and Doughty explained that communication and negotiation between the teacher and the students invite linguistic and conversational modifications which lead to improved comprehension input. As shown in Figure 1, improvement in the comprehended input, promotes, in turn, second language acquisition.

In my investigation, three types of student-teacher negotiations were considered: clarification requests, confirmation checks, and comprehension checks as defined by Pica (1987, p. 18):

Clarification requests consist of moves by which one speaker seeks assistance in understanding the other speaker's utterance through questions (e.g., "What do you mean?"), statements ("I don't understand."), and imperatives such as "Please repeat that." Confirmation checks consist of ways by which one speaker seeks to confirm the other's utterance through repetition, with rising intonation of all or part of the utterance. *Comprehension checks* consist of ways by which one speaker attempts to determine whether the other has understood what was just said (e.g. "Do you understand?" , "Should I repeat that for you?) .

I audiotaped four of my 90-minute classes, alternately, a mostly teacher-centered and a largely student-centered class. I carried recording equipment with me all the time. Every time a student, working alone, in pair or in group communicated with me, the move was recorded. To avoid tension and loss of spontaneous behavior among some students who might be overly aware of their oral performance being taped, I informed them that the recordings would be made available only for their own self-assessment and self-improvement. The recordings would enhance awareness of mistakes made in their oral performance which they were encouraged to correct. The negotiation and communication steps between student and teacher were transcribed. Negotiations, i.e., patterns of questions used for interaction, were sorted out and grouped into 3 categories: confirmation request, clarification check and comprehension check. I tallied the number of negotiations according to the type of question, and the number of communication moves, when textbooks only were used, and when supplemental materials were also used.

Table 1 shows the number of negotiation types: confirmation requests, clarification checks, and comprehension checks during two 90-minute *mostly teacher-centered* classes.

Table1 : *Mostly teacher-centered* lesson. Number of Student and Teacher Questions during Two 90-Minute Classes.

Type of Negotiation	Student Questions		Teacher Questions	
	Study from Textbook and Supplemental Materials	Study Only from Textbook	Study from Textbook and Supplemental Materials	Study Only from Textbook
Clarification requests	5	2	4	4
Confirmation checks	10	5	5	0
Comprehension checks	4	0	25	18
Total number	19	7	34	22

Table 2 shows the number of negotiation types: confirmation requests, clarification checks, and comprehension checks during two 90-minute *largely student-centered* classes.

Table2 : *Largely student-centered* lesson. Number of Student and Teacher Questions during Two 90-Minute Classes.

Type of Negotiation	Student Questions		Teacher Questions	
	Study from Textbook and Supplemental Materials	Study Only from Textbook	Study from Textbook and Supplemental Materials	Study Only from Textbook
Clarification requests	7	8	3	2
Confirmation checks	13	8	12	3
Comprehension checks	7	1	20	12
Total number	27	17	35	17

Discussion

From the present case study of second-language learning tasks and student-teacher negotiations, most students in my course, especially the freshmen, seemed to welcome my proposal in implementing certain learning behavior when conducting the activities. They especially welcomed the opportunity to contribute as individuals. Their learning experience in high school had probably emphasized passive understanding and translation of passages and perhaps grammar accuracy, with little student-teacher interaction and low student participation. A variety of four-skill, writing, reading, listening and speaking, language activities using the textbook and supplemental materials created by the students and provided by the teacher focused on actually using the language for communication. Learning how to take more active role in the classes, the students experienced how a lesson could become more

student-centered.

The object of this study was to verify learning task variables and student-teacher negotiations. Thus, the last four meetings of the course were audiotaped: alternately, a mostly teacher-centered and a largely student-centered class. The communication moves between the student and the teacher were tallied and grouped into 3 categories: confirmation request, clarification check and comprehension check. The data are displayed in Tables 1 and 2, in Step Three.

From *Table 1*, it can be hypothesized that even in mostly teacher-centered lessons, negotiation moves from both student and teacher become more frequent when supplemental materials are used. From *Table 2*, we hypothesize that students asked questions at a much higher rate than in *Table 1* since the class was largely student-centered. Interestingly, the negotiation moves from both student and teacher increased, respectively, to 27 and 35 when, as before, learning materials were not confined to textbook only.

In our case study, a lesson also using supplemental materials clearly proved more conducive to learning than a textbook-only lesson. The new materials obviously provoke curiosity and motivate students to complete the task to see if their responses are correct. As O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 44) remarked in connection with metacognitive factors, "higher order executive skills that may entail planning for, monitoring, or evaluating the success of a learning activity" may be involved in the results.

When conducting the various learning tasks, the behavior of the 21 female and 8 male subjects of this study showed some specific characteristics worth describing. Given the small number of especially male students, no firm conclusions can be drawn regarding any differences in learning behavior based on gender. Certain behavior patterns, however, prevailed among the female students. In *writing*, about 90 percent of female students followed the learning behavior instructions very closely. When *listening*, they were more attentive than male students and volunteered more readily to answer questions. While *reading*, a few females carefully applied stress and intonation features in the reading practice, resulting in a satisfactory oral performance. Females also seemed more likely to try mastering grammatical points and often asked for understanding confirmation. As for *speaking*, or oral work, although males were more subdued in the teacher-centered sessions, they were willing to express their opinions more confidently during opinion-giving activities (Speaking activities (4)). The young men were more quick to paraphrase, whereas their female counterparts spoke less spontaneously, perhaps out of fear of making mistakes and being negatively judged by others.

Concluding Thoughts

This case investigation on learning tasks variables and student-teacher interaction

in a group of mixed level students from different years in college revealed that the learning tasks performed under the proposed learning behavior were welcomed. From the results obtained in this study, described in Step Three, the students clearly took a more active role, even increasing the amount of interaction with the teacher. A limitation of the study was that students were not directly instructed to apply certain learning techniques during the activities described in Step Two above. However, the attempt was to approach the students in a less formal way and try to make them aware of possible learning ways that would promote more effective language learning. My intention was and still remains to raise awareness among the students and to encourage each of them to realize that complete dependence on the teacher is neither effective nor constructive in the learning process to obtain command of English language skills. On the other hand, specifying certain learning techniques and undertaking a future study in student-teacher interactions is certainly of empirical value.

The present case study was based on the supposition that when supplemental materials complete the textbook, there is an increase in negotiations between the students and their teacher. The findings substantiated this hypothesis, although a more detailed analysis with a breakdown of the audio-recorded production of communication moves should have been included. From the total number of moves recorded, it was clear that the teacher still initiated most of them, but this is understandable given the students' initial lack of confidence in their English. Not surprisingly, negotiations from the student side were voiced largely in Japanese. The teacher, however, always replied in English, out of personal pedagogical principles. Seriously committed learners, although few, struggled to express themselves in English, and left the distinct impression that they were satisfied and even gratified with the opportunities given them to confirm, check understanding or request clarifications. The more open and relaxed classroom atmosphere seemed to be genuinely appreciated. By the end of the course, students were engaging in negotiations with the teacher more frankly and naturally.

In conclusion, the students who experienced a different learning behavior proposed in our course and new ways to interact with their peers and teacher will certainly change to some extent their English language learning approach. Although one cannot generalize on the basis of this modest case study, I believe that those students who are more eager to improve their language skills will incorporate some of my suggestions into their ongoing study.

要約

日本の大学に入学する学生は既に6年間、英語を学習している。彼らは①物語り中心の教科書を使用する読訳教授法で教師主導の授業を受けてきたか、②読訳教授法に英会話練習を加味した授業で教師とAssistant Teacher (AT) の指導の下に、個人・ペア又はグループ単位で英

語を学んできた。

本研究は、種々の学習教材、活動と学生-教師間対話ならびに両者間の関連について知ることを目的としている。調査は1学期間(16週)、英語以外の6科目を専攻する男女学生(80%が新入生)から構成されるクラスを対象に行われた。授業の際、学習方法が提示された。1週間は主として教師中心、次の1週間は主として学生中心というように二つの学習方法を交互に採用して、授業が行われた。両学習方法について教科書のみ使用の授業、教科書と補助教材使用の授業が実施された。三類型の学生-教師間対話、交流が考察された。

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