Differences in Input and Learners' Comprehension

Toshie Agawa

Keisen University

This study investigates learners' comprehension, focusing on whether or not a task allows learners to directly participate in negotiation of meaning. Beginning-level adult students were divided into two groups (GA and GB). Both groups were given ten minutes to work on their tasks. GB were allowed to directly participate in negotiation of meaning for their task completion, whereas GA were not. After the tasks, the participants' comprehension was measured by the degree to which they were able to understand the instructions and therefore accurately mark the locations on the map. Also, the interactions between GB students were transcribed and examined. The results indicate that low-level learners need considerably more time to reach comprehension by negotiating meaning interactionally than listening to others' negotiation. This paper will also discuss pedagogical implications for classroom teachers, and conclude with suggestions for further research.

インタラクションの中で意味交渉を行うか否かによる、学習者の理解の違いを検証する。初級レベルの学習者２グループが同じ制限時間内でタスクを行い、正解率を比較した。インタラクションを行ったグループよりも、意味交渉が行われている会話を聴いたグループの方が良い成績であった。EFL環境での英語教育への示唆も試みる。

Introduction

Tasks have long been used as vehicles for communicative language teaching, and many researchers have used tasks as tools for investigating second language acquisition (SLA). Different scholars define 'task' in different ways. For example, according to Nunan (1989), "the communicative task [is] a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehension, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right" (p.10). According to Skehan (1996), "Tasks. . . are activities which have meaning as their primary focus. Success in tasks is evaluated in terms of achievement of an outcome, and tasks generally bear some resemblance to real-life language use" (p.20). Similarly, Willis (1996) defines

a task as a "goal-oriented activity"(p.53) which makes learners "focus on meaning"(p.54) and bears " a real outcome"(p.53). As Richards (2001) claims, it seems that "there is a commonsensical understanding that a task is an activity or goal that is carried out using language" (p. 224).

One way to categorize tasks is to divide them into one-way tasks and two-way tasks. In a one-way task, only one participant holds information necessary for task completion. In other words, a one-way task always calls for a one-way flow of information from an information supplier to a requester. A two-way task, on the other hand, involves exchanges of information in a two-way direction between participants. This paper focuses on one-way tasks and learners' comprehension depending on whether or not the task allowed learners to directly participate in negotiation of meaning.

Literature review

Previous research into what promotes learners' acquisition has led some SLA researcher to argue that input is necessary for acquisition. For example, Krashen (1985) argues that access to comprehensible input and a low affective filter are crucial for learners to develop their interlanguage (IL). Long (1983) also claims comprehensible input is required for acquisition. To make input comprehensible for learners, the interlocutor may have to modify his/her speech. Long distinguishes between pre-modified input and interactionally modified input. The former refers to simplified speech directed at non-native speakers (NNS). It involves, for example, shorter length of T units, fewer embeddings, and a greater repetition of nouns and verbs. The latter, on the other hand, involves a modification of the conversational structure itself. Interactionally modified

speech may contain a greater number of confirmation checks, comprehension checks, and self- and other repetitions. Long (1983) suggests that modified interaction, where negotiation of meaning takes place making input understandable for the learner, is necessary to proceed acquisition.

A number of researchers have examined how negotiation of meaning facilitates learners' comprehension. For example, Gass and Varonis (1994) provided unmodified input, modified input and interaction (i.e. interactionally modified input) with native (NS) and non-native (NNS) participants in order for learners to complete a task. Gass and Varonis compared the types of input by looking at the participants' comprehension in terms of accuracy of the task outcome. They found that modified input yielded better NNS comprehension than unmodified input. They also discovered that interaction yielded better NNS comprehension. However, it may not have been the interaction per se that contributed to the higher rate of understanding. Rather, since interacted participants were given more time to complete the task, it may have been the amount of time allowed for the participants to spend on the task that resulted in better understanding. Interacted participants were exposed to the target language for a longer period of time giving them an advantage in obtaining a higher degree of comprehension.

A study conducted by Ellis et al (cited in Ellis, 2001) also compared 1) baseline directives (i.e. unmodified input), 2) premodified directives, and 3) interactionally modified directives used in a non-reciprocal task. They found that the participants understood the interactionally modified directives best. However, again, the amount of time given to complete the task was not controlled in this study. As a result, as Ellis himself points out (Ellis 2001), " the tasks differed in time, with

the learners receiving interactionally modified input enjoying a considerable advantage over the learners receiving both the premodified and baseline input" (p.58). The question then is what would happen if the time were controlled?

One study (Ellis and He, cited in Ellis 2001) controlled the amount of time taken to finish the task. Premodified and interactionally modified directions were compared in terms of the degree of participants' comprehension. Ellis and He could not find statistically significant differences between the premodified and interactionally modified input. While Ellis does not deny the need for interactionally modified input, he argues that repeating premodified input may help learners process input to comprehension as effectively as interactionally modified input.

Some studies have investigated the comprehension differences between learners who participated in interaction to negotiate meaning, and learners who "eavesdropped" (Ellis 2001, p.59) (i.e. listened to the negotiation without participation). Pica (1992) compared the degree of comprehension between learners who participated in meaning negotiation and those who observed it. No difference in comprehension between them was found. Ellis and Heimbach's study (cited in Ellis 2001) about young children's effect on negotiation of meaning also supports Pica's results. As shown in these studies, interactionally modified input can be obtained not only by participating in the interaction but also by listening to it.

So far, I have cited studies which argue, with time controlled, the possibility of effectiveness of premodifed input as well as interactionally modified input. I have also presented the results of previous studies that suggest interactionally modified input can be benefited from not only by participating in the interaction, but also by listening to it. Based on these results, one may presume that learners could benefit more from listening to tape-recorded interaction if they could repeat the part they did not understand in the first round. Based on this theoretical ground and the speculation built on it, it can be hypothesized that given the same amount of time to work on a task, learners who listen to interaction which contains modification can do as well as learners who interact to obtain the information necessary to complete the task. In order to examine this hypothesis, I conducted research using the method explained in the following section.

Method

Participants

Five female and four male students at a language school in Japan participated in this research. All of the participants were office workers, and ranged in age from 22 to 50. They had been studying English at the language school for two to eight months. All had been placed in an elementary communicative course based on an assessment of their skills in an interview with an instructor of the school. Five of the participants attended two 50-minute classes per week, which were taught by different teachers. The other participants took one 50-minute class per week. Overall, they are active in class and usually prepared for their lessons. However, at the time of the research, none of them were using English at work or at home, which made the textbook and classroom study time their main exposure to English. The students' progress was discussed in weekly teachers' meetings, and students were placed in higher or lower classes as deemed appropriate.

Procedure

The participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups (GA and GB). GA worked individually and GB worked in pairs. Three students worked in GA. GA students had a worksheet with a map of Vancouver. Each of them worked in a classroom alone using a cassette player. They were asked to listen to tape-recorded dyads on the classroom cassette for *Interchange 1* (Richards, 1990) talking about the locations of six places, and to mark the locations on the map. The worksheet was also taken from Interchange 1 and modified by the author. The dyads included repetition and confirmation by speakers. GA students were allowed to stop the tape, rewind it, and listen to the desired part as many times as they wished within the given time (ten minutes).

GB students were asked to work in pairs. One of the paired students (student A) had a map of Vancouver, which was exactly the same as the one given to the GA students. The other student of the pair (student B) had the map with all the locations necessary for the task completion already marked on it. Student A had to ask student B to explain the locations of the missing places so that student A could complete the map. Both groups were given ten minutes to work on the tasks.

During the interactive task, all GB pairs' conversations were audio-recorded for later analysis.

After the tasks, the participants' comprehension was measured by the degree to which they were able to understand the instructions and therefore accurately mark the locations on the map. Also, the dialogue on the cassette of *Interchange 1* (Appendix 1) and the interaction between GB students were transcribed.

Results and discussion

The results are shown in terms of the number of locations the participants marked correctly. GA students, who listened to the tape-recorded instructions, showed a higher rate of comprehension than GB students, who interacted with another student (means = 4 out of 6 and 3 out of 6). Two out of the three GB pairs could not finish the task within the given time (ten minutes), while all GA students could.

Since I expected both groups' scores to be almost the same, I found the actual results a little surprising. The reason the GB (interacted) students failed to score as high as the GA (listening) students may be because of their low fluency level. In order to compare the fluency of the speakers on the Interchange tape and the fluency of the GB students, the number of words on both tapes were counted. Repetition and gap fillers were excluded from the data. While the average number of words produced by the speakers on the Interchange tape was 125.5 per minute, that of the GB participants was only 55.7 per minute. As mentioned earlier, all the participants were taking an elementary communicative course at the language school, thus it is not surprising that they needed a considerable amount of time to produce an utterance. In addition, there was one case in which the listener asked his partner to slow down. Thus in this situation the difficulty in communicating may have been caused not only by the speaker's low fluency level, but also by the listener's low level as well. The italicized sections in Example 1 illustrate this.

Example 1
GB2: Granville Street, next street Ho-w- e Street.
GB1: Ho-w- e?
GB2: Granville Street? Next, Ho-w-e Street? Next, Ho-wa-nby

Street. Ho-w-e Street. On the Ho-w-e Street.
GB1: *Wait, wait. Slowly.* Granville Street?
GB2: Yes.
GB1: And next--
GB2: Next street. Ho-w-e Street. On the Ho-w-e Street.

Along with the slow speaking speed, GB's interaction included numerous repetitions and gap fillers. Examples 2 and 3 show repetitions, and 4 and 5 show gap fillers. "Etto", "un" and "um toh" shown in the examples are participants' L1 (Japanese) gap fillers.

Example 2 (repetitions)
GB1: Across Castle Hotel. *Ca, Ca, Castle, Castle,---*
GB2: *Castle, Castle* Street, on the corner of ah, Ca, etto, *Granville Street, Granville Street* and West Georgia Street. *Granville.*

Example 3 (repetitions)
GB3: *The, the, the, the library is, the library is* Burrard Street, and Rob…, ah, cross the Burrard Street and Robson Street.

Example 4 (gap fillers)
GB3: *Ah, ahh, ahh, un. Ummm, toh. Ahhh* Burrard.

Example 5 (gap fillers)
GB3: *Uh, toh.* Once more. *Etto.* Where is the *ah*, Smithe St…, on the Smithe Street?
GB4: Smithe Street?
GB3: *Eh,* the library, *ah*, where is the library? Is there the library, *ah*, on the Smithe Street?

Conclusion

This study used one-way tasks and examined beginning students' comprehension. The results indicate that low-level learners may need considerably more time to reach comprehension by negotiating meaning interactionally than eavesdropping negotiation. These results suggest at least two points. First, for low-proficiency learners, listening tasks are a more efficient device than interaction to learn a language. This issue may be more crucial in an EFL setting, where students' exposure to the target language is limited. Secondly, the issue of time consumption should be looked at from a social point of view. In the real world, or even in class, too many pauses, repetitions and gap fillers are quite frustrating. Similarly, as Pica (1994) points out, "too many clarification questions can be downright annoying" (p.519). Listening tasks may tackle this problem. Ellis (2003) points out that listening tasks "provide a non-threatening way of engaging beginner learners in meaning-centered activity" (p.37). Based on this, together with other reasons, he argues that "listening tasks provide the obvious starting point for a task-based course designed for low-proficiency learners" (Ellis, 2003, p.37).

Further studies

This study focused only on comprehension and did not examine acquisition. Nevertheless, acquisition should be mentioned here because the reason for this study was to examine comprehension as a requisite for acquisition.

Although no one disagrees about the necessity of comprehension for language acquisition, it may not be the case that acquisition is completely comprehension driven.

Researchers such as Swain (1985) argue that learner output plays an important role in acquisition. From this point of view, then, interaction is meaningful and thus, further studies are needed to determine the level to which listening tasks are more efficient and less frustrating for learners.

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Appendix

Tapescript

Interchange 1, Unit 8 p. 49 Listening section
Visitors to Vancouver are asking for information. Listen and
mark these places on the map.

1. *the library*

A: Excuse me. Excuse me, please.
B: Yes?
A: Uh… I'm, I'm a visitor here in Vancouver for the first time.
B: Uh –huh.
A: And I want to go to the library, the main public library down town.
B: Oh, yes. The library. Well, that's easy. You know Robson Street?
A: Uh, yes, I think I do.
B: And do you know Burrard Street?
A: Yeah, but ah.. Where is the library?
B: Well, it's, it's very easy to find. The library is on the corner
of Robson and Burrard.
A: Oh, now I see. Thanks.

2. *Eaton's*

A: Hello. Uh… Do you know where Eaton's, uh, Eaton's
department store is, please?
B: Eaton's? It's on Granville street mall and it's just across the
street from the Castle Hotel.

3. *the Four Seasons Hotel*

A: Ah, sorry to bother you, but where is the Four Seasons
Hotel?
B: Oh, you are looking for the Four Seasons? Well, it's on
Howe Street, opposite the Mandarin Hotel. You can't miss it.

4. *the Orpheum Theatre*

A: Hello, um, I 'm trying to find the Orpheum Theatre.
B: Well, let me think. The Orpheum Theatre… It's on the corner
of Smithe and Granville Street Mall. It's very easy to find.
A: Thanks a lot. I don't want to be late for the performance.

5. *the YMCA*

A: Uh, excuse me. I'm looking for the YMCA.
B: Uh –huh, the Y, M, C, A, hmm... It's opposite the BC Hydro
Building. It's near the corner of Nelson and Burrard.
A: Great. Thanks.

6. *the Art Gallery*

A: Excuse me. I am new in town. Where is the Art Gallery, please?
B: Let me see. Oh, yes. The Art Gallery is on Robson Street,
opposite the Robson Square. You can't miss it.