



Communication through a poster presentation task

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This paper reports how Japanese university students were encouraged to communicate with their peers in English and to pay attention to their language through a poster presentation task. The students' attention to L2 (second language) form increased as they gave a presentation repeatedly.

ポスターを利用したプレゼンテーション・タスクは、どのように日本人大学生の英語コミュニケーション活動を促し、また彼らの注意を言語に向けさせたかどうかを報告する。繰り返しプレゼンテーションをおこなうことにより、学習者の第二言語への注意を高めたことがわかった。

Task-based language learning and teaching has aroused much attention in language classrooms and in second language acquisition (SLA) research since the early 1980s (e.g., Bygate, Skehan, & Swain 2001; Ellis 2003; Long & Crookes 1992; Prabhu 1987). Bygate et al. indicated that pedagogy can be defined as “intervention into thought and behavior which is concerned to promote learning processes for intended outcomes” (p.1). Thus, it involves decisions by teachers, action by learners and learning outcomes. Since tasks are a central element of language pedagogy, they are placed within this three-way relationship. On the occasion of the use of a communication task in the classroom, this study evaluated the relationship between three elements: the teacher's role in the classroom, the action of the learners, and learning outcomes. The present study's expectations regarding these elements are described in more detail at the end of this section.

After careful consideration of the previous SLA research, this study attempted to use a poster presentation task for the following reasons. First, it was determined to encourage learners to speak English. The task

required learners to give a presentation repeatedly as well as to communicate with their peers by asking and answering questions about the presentations; thus, it was expected to provide them with many opportunities to use English. Second, it was utilized to give them opportunities to pay attention to their language. According to Lynch and Maclean (2001), one of the pedagogic aims of the repeated poster presentation task was “to practice formulating and handling questions under time pressure but with the (assumed) benefit of immediate repetition” (p. 142). The present study investigated whether learners could benefit from repetition of a task. More specifically, it examined whether they paid more attention to their language through the repeated experience of giving a presentation.

The major aim of the poster presentation task was to promote the students’ attention to L2 form by providing them with many opportunities to produce output. Swain (1995) indicates that output helps learners notice a gap between what they want to say and what they can say, which may trigger cognitive processes to generate linguistic knowledge new for them or consolidate their existing knowledge. In other words, output prompts learners to consciously recognize some of their linguistic problems, and this noticing leads to their second language learning. The importance of *noticing* in L2 learning is accredited to Schmidt (1990). He argued that to acquire any particular aspect of L2, one first needs to notice it.

Some studies have investigated the effectiveness of task repetition on L2 learning. Bygate (2001) showed that an earlier experience of a task promoted learners’ performance on the subsequent same task. In other words, he found the effectiveness of a same task repetition on language learning.

Lynch and Maclean (2001) explored how they can successfully encourage learners to do a task repeatedly in a natural way. The 14 learners engaged in the poster carousel task. First they were paired up and given a different research article, and then they made a poster based on the article. Second, the posters were displayed around the classroom and one student (A) from each pair stood beside his or her poster and waited for other students to come and ask some questions. The other students (B) were required to visit the posters one by one clockwise and ask questions about each poster. Third, their roles were switched. Hence, B stood by their poster and A went to others’ posters to ask questions.

Lynch and Maclean (2001) audio recorded six conversations between every host/visitor pair and also conducted a self-report questionnaire. They analyzed the data and found that the poster carousel task facilitated learners’ attention to the form and content of their language. They also found that learners maintained their level of interest over the six cycles of the carousel. They concluded that “our investigation of this specific classroom task underscores the crucial importance of developing effective techniques to help learners to exploit the potential of task-based interaction by monitoring changes in their own performances and noticing useful L2 features in the performances of others” (p.159).

The present study was stimulated by the above studies and the researcher decided to explore whether Japanese university students are encouraged to communicate with their peers through a repeated poster presentation and whether they pay more attention to their language. Two main research questions were established:

1. Do learners pay more attention to their language through repetition of a poster presentation task?
2. Do learners think they learned through repetition of a poster presentation task?

In this task, the specific role which the teacher, (I), attempted to play was *facilitator*, encouraging the students to prepare everything on their own. By stepping away from a directive role, the teacher tried to help the students find their own pathways to success through guidance, as Brown (1994) defines a teacher's role as facilitator to be. The study's expectation of the action of the learners was to develop autonomy by making their own choices throughout the whole task, and by working on their own to successfully convey their messages to others in English. Regarding the learning outcomes, the study expected learners to give a presentation using a poster in front of others and to discuss it with their peers in English.

Method

Participants

The participants were 127 first-year Japanese students from six required "Cinema English II" classes at a university in Saitama. This course was offered in the fall over thirteen weeks, and a 90 minute lesson was held once a week. The students taking this course had already completed "Cinema English I" in the spring. They were at a false-beginning level of proficiency and placed at this level based on their performance on the placement test, SLEP Test, administered at the beginning of the spring.

The poster presentation task

Each student engaged in a poster presentation task in which he or she presented his or her favorite movie using a poster at the end of the fall semester. The students were required to prepare a poster and a manuscript for their presentation. This was the course assignment and 30% of their grade was decided based on their performance on the assignment (10% - poster, 10% - manuscript, 10% - oral presentation).

The preparation for the presentation started one month before the poster presentation day, and about 30 to 45 minutes were spent on it in every lesson for four weeks according to the schedule shown in Figure 1.

Table 1. The schedule for the poster presentation

| Schedule | Things done in class |
|----------|---|
| Week 1 | The teacher showed a model for giving a poster presentation. The students started searching for information using the Internet. |
| Week 2 | Continued searching for information. Started writing a manuscript and making a poster. |
| Week 3 | Continued preparing the manuscript and poster. |
| Week 4 | Continued preparing the manuscript and poster. |
| Week 5 | Gave a poster presentation. |

On the presentation day, the class was divided into three groups, A, B, C. There were seven students in each group on average. First, the students in one group (A) displayed their posters around the classroom and stood by them. The rest of the students (B&C) were required to visit at least three presenters and ask questions about their presentation.

The presentation time was limited to five minutes, and after viewing one presentation, the listeners moved to another presenter and the presenters began to give their presentation again. After A gave the presentation repeatedly for about twenty minutes, B began to give the presentation following the same procedure, and after B, C did. In other words, the three groups gave their poster presentation in turns, and they were required to listen to others' presentations and ask questions when they were not presenting. In order to encourage the students to ask questions, they were required to ask the presenter at least two questions and to write down the answers they obtained on a worksheet.

Data

A questionnaire was administered after the poster presentation task (Appendix 1) to determine how the students felt about the task and to examine whether they made any changes in their language over the course of several experiences of the presentation.

Results

Research question 1: "Do learners pay more attention to their language through repetition of a poster presentation task?"

On average, the students gave their presentation about 3.4 times. In response to question 17 "After giving the first presentation, did you make any changes in your later presentations?," about 65% of the students answered that they worked on changing their speech to some extent. More specifically, about 17% of the students indicated that they

paid attention to making more eye contact and using gestures as they spoke, and about 48% said they made changes in their language, such as speaking rate, the choice of vocabulary, the sentence structures, and the clarity of speech. The examples of their comments were "I tried to speak more slowly," "I used simpler words," "I changed some of the sentences into shorter ones," "I used Japanese a little bit to make the audience understand more," and "I tried to speak more clearly." Therefore, the study found that repeated experience of giving a presentation drew about half of the students' attention to their L2.

On the other hand, about 35% of the students answered that they did not change their speech. Most of the answers regarding the reason for this were related to time constraints. For example, they indicated, "I did not have time to change my speech," "I was not capable of changing on the spot," and "It was easy to read a manuscript repeatedly."

Research question 2: "Do learners think they learned through repeated practice of a poster presentation task?"

Regarding the second research question, it appeared that the students felt they gained through repetition of their presentation. Regarding question 13, "Do you think giving a poster presentation was effective in improving your English skills?," about 57% of the students marked either very effective or effective (they were asked to mark on a scale of 5 to 1: 5 – very effective, 4 – effective, 3 – okay, 2 – not effective, and 1 – not effective at all). Some of their comments were "I got used to talking in front of people," "I could learn how to give a presentation," "I became more comfortable or confident in speaking English," "It was good

that I could listen to my classmates speaking English and understand it,” and “It was good that I could think of what to do to give a good presentation.” About 41% of the students marked three, and only 2% marked two (none was marked one).

Discussion

The results from the questionnaire showed that the repeated practice of output, using a poster presentation task, appeared to promote the Japanese university students’ attention to their language. Even though the presenters had very little time between giving presentations, about two thirds of the students thought of what they could do to give a more comprehensible and better presentation. As Swain (1995) suggested, the presenters’ noticing of a gap between what they actually did and what they could not do through output is important to promote their learning.

On the other hand, the questionnaire revealed that about one third of the students did not attempt to change their speech. It appeared that most of them could not do so due to a lack of time. In order to help them improve their speech, it seems to be important to provide them with more time between presentations. One way to do this is to have the students give their presentation again the following week. This might allow them to think about how they can change their speech to improve it, and also give them enough time to work on making changes.

The poster presentation task including both the preparation procedures and the presentation itself seemed to be quite appealing to the students. Not only did about 57% of the

students feel that giving a presentation was effective for language learning, as already mentioned, but also about 52% of the students felt that the preparation was effective too (none of the students answered that the preparation was not effective). Furthermore, about 56% of the students answered that the poster presentation task was interesting while only 3% answered that it was not interesting. Many comments indicated that the students enjoyed communicating with their peers through a poster presentation.

Overall, the poster presentation task appeared to bring about the learning outcome which the present study expected, as it found that out of 127 students, 121 of them managed to give a presentation in English using a poster. Additionally, all the students submitted a worksheet on which they reported the questions they had asked and the answers they obtained. However, 6 students did not give a presentation because they failed to finish preparing for it by the presentation day. They handed in only a poster or a manuscript after the presentation day. Thus, it can be said that the study’s expectation regarding the action of the learners, that is, the students would develop autonomy by working on their own, was not realized sufficiently. More specifically, the teacher, (I), could not fully play the role of facilitator to help and guide all of the students to complete the task. This fact might also account for the finding that about one third of the students did not make any changes to their speech to improve it. In order for learners to benefit more from the task, the teacher needs to thoroughly provide appropriate advice and guidance. This is quite challenging, but important to promote the learners’ learning process to reach the intended outcomes.

Conclusion

This was a preliminary research. For further research, in addition to the questionnaire, the presentations need to be audio taped to analyze as accurately as possible what changes the students make in each presentation. This will also reveal the areas in which the students choose not to change their speech. In conclusion, this research found that a poster presentation task was quite effective in facilitating learners to communicate with others naturally and drawing their attention to their L2. Furthermore, the learners felt that they gained from the experience. This type of task can be used in various types of classrooms and surely it will encourage learners to interact with others.

Mutsuko Nagasaki is teaching at Seigakuin University in Saitama. Her interests include task-based language learning and teaching, classroom interaction, and second language acquisition.

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Appendix 1

Poster Presentation Questionnaire

Q1 Was it the first time for you to give a poster presentation? Yes / No

Q2 If you answered no in Q1, when and where did you do it?

Q3 How did you feel about the poster presentation task? (including both preparation and presentation) Mark your answer.

| | | |
|-------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------|
| <u>Very interesting</u> | <u>Okay</u> | <u>Not interesting at all</u> |
| 5 | 4 | 3 |
| | | 2 |
| | | 1 |

Q4 If you marked 4 or 5 in Q3, why was it interesting?

Q5 If you marked 2 or 1 in Q3, why wasn't it interesting?

Q6 What were the difficult parts of the preparation for your presentation? Write everything you felt was difficult to do.

Q7 What were the easy parts of the preparation for your presentation? Write everything you felt was easy to do.

Q8 Do you think the preparation for the poster presentation was effective in improving your English skills?

| | | |
|-----------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|
| <u>Very effective</u> | <u>Okay</u> | <u>Not effective at all</u> |
| 5 | 4 | 3 |
| | | 2 |
| | | 1 |

Q9 If you marked 4 or 5 in Q8, why do you think so?

Q10 If you marked 1 or 2 in Q8, why do you think so?

Q11 What was the most difficult thing when you gave a presentation?

Q12 What was the easiest thing when you gave a presentation?

Q13 Do you think giving a poster presentation was effective in improving your English skills?

| | | |
|-----------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|
| <u>Very effective</u> | <u>Okay</u> | <u>Not effective at all</u> |
| 5 | 4 | 3 |
| | | 2 |
| | | 1 |

Q14 If you marked 4 or 5 in Q13, why do you think so?

Q15 If you marked 1 or 2 in Q13, why do you think so?

Q16 How many times did you give a presentation?

Q17 After giving the first presentation, did you make any changes in your later presentations? Yes / No

Q18 If you marked yes in Q17, what did you change?

Q19 If you marked no in Q17, why didn't you make any changes?

Q20 Write any comments for future improvements of the poster presentation task or write any comments about the poster presentation task.

Note: The questions in this survey were written in Japanese. The students were asked to answer the questions in Japanese in order to allow them to fully express their ideas.