

Factors promoting learner-learner talk in group work

-Aiming at effective group work for lower level Japanese students of English-

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Introduction

In recent years, more and more language teachers have introduced task-based group (pair or small-group) work in the classroom in keeping with the trend of developing communicative competence. While not many empirical studies have shown any decisive evidence on the effectiveness of group work as opposed to teacher-fronted classes, advantages of group-work have been shown in comparative studies of the two teaching types. For example, a study of Pica and Doughty (1985a) suggests that group work provided students with more opportunities to practice speaking the target language and to engage in direct interaction. In contrast to the traditional teacher-fronted classroom where students have a limited time to practice speaking the target language, task-based group work seems to maximize the amount of time in which individual student can use the target language and to provide more realistic situations in which language is used for negotiation of meaning.

However, teachers should understand the fact that every group work does not necessarily provide each student with a chance of interactional talk. There seems some factors that teachers of second language need to take into account for providing optimal group work which can promote individual learner's oral interactional use of the target language. In this paper I investigated three such factors: (1) teacher direction and support, (2) task selection, and (3) group composition with particular attention given to the characteristics of Japanese students. Lastly, I discussed how I can apply a specified task to lower level Japanese college students.

1. Teacher's direction and support

Teachers may think what their roles are, if the group-work activity is centered in the classroom. Furthermore, as Brewster claims, teaching learners 'how to co-operate and interact in groups' (Brewster 1991, p120) has been ignored in the classroom. Following this claim, I would like to suggest that the most important role for teachers is to give learners adequate direction and support for successful group communication.

First, teachers need to make learners aware of group members' responsibility for contributing to group work task for the collaborative talk which leads to the successful completion of each task. Fisher proposes 'exploratory talk' in which 'participants

engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas' (Fisher 1996, p250). In contrast to such educational talk in the classroom, social talk in the real situation is not necessarily constructed collaboratively. However, since Japanese students generally tend to accept a partner's speech without criticism, or hesitate to ask questions, making them adopt collaborative attitudes is one of the important roles for a teacher.

Second, teachers should teach interactional strategies which may be crucial for promoting exploratory talk in group-work. For instance, students need to be trained to use collaborative turn-taking skills more. While such strategies are beneficial for the educational talk, they also have important functions in the social situation for negotiating meaning and maintaining the discourse when a communication breakdown occurs. In addition, interactional (conversational) modifications such as confirmation checks, clarification requests and comprehension checks are considered useful strategies. As stated above, Japanese students generally lack in the attitudes to make questions positively. Therefore, demonstrating these interactional skills clearly and making learners practice them in group work is one of the important roles for teachers.

Third, teachers should explicitly explain the goal, purpose, and procedure of each task before its execution. Insufficient explanation of the task procedure risks creating a gap between the teacher's intention and the learner's interpretation of the task. Each learner's clear understanding of the task and his/her role in the group will contribute to the smooth progress for the efficient activity within the limited time of the lesson. Teacher's such role will maximize the benefits of task-based group work which can produce collaborative and interactional learner-learner talk.

2. Task Selection

I will now discuss the importance of adequate task selection which stems from the fact that all tasks do not necessarily guarantee interactional talk and negotiation of meaning among students. Some studies have examined task types and patterns of organization that stimulate learner-learner interaction in group work. Pica and Doughty (1985b) examined the extent to which task-based group work facilitates second language acquisition and found that task selection is crucial because many tasks do not compel individual learner to negotiate meaning but only require learners to participate in a task. Although decision-making tasks are popular as communicative activities in the classroom, Pica and Doughty argue that these tasks do not ensure negotiated interaction among group participants. In such tasks, higher proficiency learners tend to dominate conversation and consequently other learners have little participation, being disputed or only ignored. By contrast, they found that information-gap tasks resulted in more

negotiation and conversational adjustments. This is because in information-gap tasks all learners who are provided with non-identical distributed information need to participate in the talk to exchange information with other participants in the same group or pair to complete the task. Thus, information-transfer type tasks are likely to create more opportunities for learner-learner talk than decision-making tasks.

On the other hand, Duff (1986) proposes the adoption of problem-solving tasks and debate tasks for particularly higher level learners. Although his findings are beneficial for the higher level students, he does not take into account that the two types of tasks do not both require the interaction of all participants. Another interesting finding of his study concerns the relation between the results of the tasks and cultural characteristics of the learners. Duff found that 'Chinese produced more words in performing the tasks and asked more questions than Japanese in J/J dyads, however, there seemed to be less interactions. In CH/J dyads, it appeared that J were somewhat frustrated by their interlocutors' discourse strategies' (Duff 1986, p173). A likely reason for this is that Japanese students are not generally accustomed to participating in debate-type talk and 'face threatening' (Brown and Levinson quoted in Duff 1986. p169) interactional patterns in either educational or social contexts. Therefore, decision-making tasks and debate tasks do not seem suited to co-operative interactional situations for Japanese students.

Although the studies discussed above do not provide decisive results, they give teachers helpful information concerning task selection. Particularly for Japanese teachers, the 'information-transfer' activity in the task seems the most important factor, because it triggers more negotiation of meaning among all participants. I would like to explore the analysis of the task types suggested by Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun(1993) since it is particularly informative for task selection. The analysis involves four conditions which would promote the greatest opportunities for the negotiation of meaning:

1. Each interactant holds a different portion of information which must be exchanged and manipulated in order to reach the task outcome.
2. Both interactants are required to request and supply this information to each other.
3. Interactants have the same or convergent goals.
4. Only one acceptable outcome is possible from their attempts to meet this goal.

(Pica, Kanagy and Falodum 1993, p17)

Under these conditions, learners are likely to be compelled to participate in group work. Moreover, the conditions are likely to help teachers not only select tasks but also design original tasks for specific students.

3. Group composition

I will now consider 'group/pair composition' as an important factor and propose that teachers should take it into account for promoting more interactional and collaborative learner-learner talk. In this section, I will focus on students' speaking proficiency as an important element to consider when pairing or grouping learners. In order to give evidence for the interrelation between the talk in groups and students' speaking proficiency, I shall refer to relevant empirical studies.

First, I would like to consider this issue from the study on triad-group work by Bennett and Cass (1988). We can obtain two valuable findings from this study. They set three types of the group for the study: homogenous, heterogeneous (1 High, 1 Average, 1 Low), and mixed (1 High, 2 Low and 2 High, 1 Low). One of the findings is that the mixed groups work very well and give more explanations and suggestions than expected. In particular, mixed groups composed of one high and two low proficiency learners performed much better than those composed of two high and one low proficiency learners. Bennett and Cass supposed that the reason for this is that the low proficiency learner tended to be ignored in the latter mixed combination. A second interesting finding is that high proficiency learners performed well and their talk was instructional in nature irrespective of the type of groups in which they worked. Contrary to the suspicion that combining high proficiency learners with low ones might affect the former negatively, this study shows that the former are not likely to be influenced negatively in any combination. Thus, we can conclude that how to combine the lower proficiency learner with the high proficiency one will affect the opportunity of the lower learners' participation in the group work.

Next, I will consider group composition in the light of a study on pair work. Yule and Macdonald (1990) studied the effect of pairing different combinations of learners in the execution of map tasks. The map task which they used in the study consists of one speaker (the sender) describing a route to a partner (the receiver) so that the partner can trace the route on a map that is identical to the one given to the speaker. This type of task is likely to create interactive situations where both learners have to find solutions in order to complete the task. However, the map tasks tend to result in one-way talk depending on the conditions of the combination of the pair. Yule and Macdonald found that in the L>H combination (a lower proficiency student was in the sender role to a

higher proficiency receiver) the pairs produced much more number of negotiated solutions than in the H>L combination pairs.

In the map tasks, the receiver who seeks information has to attempt to negotiate meaning since it is the receiver who has the most urgent need to ensure that comprehension take place to complete the task. On the other hand, the sender is in a position of being able to control the interaction at will, because the sender holds the key information. For these reasons, the higher proficiency students tend to dominate talk in the sender role. However, when the higher proficiency learner is in the receiver role and the lower proficiency learner in the sender, the interaction can be activated by the receiver's more use of questions and conversational adjustments which all prompt the sender. Accordingly, the lower proficiency learner in the sender can have more opportunities to use the target language both to send messages they hold and to answer the questions from the receiver. Despite the suspicion that the higher proficiency learners might benefit dominantly in such a pair, Yule and Macdonald state the following:

The L>H interactions force the higher proficiency speaker to listen (as well as speak), to take one's interlocutor's perspective into account (rather than ignore it), and to tailor one's contribution to fit a particular interactive partner's knowledge (instead of only displaying one's own knowledge).

(Yule and Macdonald, 1990, p553)

Thus, both learners who have experience in an L>H pair may be aware that they have to take the interlocutor's needs into account for successful solution and they may work well together even in an H<L pair. Furthermore, we can assume that such training in pair work will lead learners to effective social conversation.

From the above studies, we can conclude that teachers need to create such opportunities for the planned composition of pairs or groups for providing learners with equal chances to talk actively as much as possible.

4. Application of the information-transfer task to Japanese students

Finally, while keeping in above factors in mind, I will explain how the information-transfer task, which seems best suited for pair work, can be applied to lower level Japanese students who are less experienced in pair work talking.

The map-task adopted by Anderson and Lynch (1988) , "Tai Tu City Tour" (See Appendix 1), is an information-transfer type task that was originally designed as a listening pair task carried out in accordance with the recorded instructions. The maps for

both the sender and receiver are less complicated, because all the buildings are named and there are no irregular intersections or unmarked roads. As stated in the former section, this information- transfer type task requires both learners in a pair to concentrate on reaching the one goal (=destination). Moreover, this map task nearly meets the four conditions discussed in Section 2 that comprise an optimal task. Thus, this map task is appropriate for promoting collaborative and interactional talk among paired lower-level Japanese college students. It appears that one disadvantage of the map task is its use of limited vocabularies concerning reference to the direction and places with short turn-taking. However, the first aim of applying this task to the target students is to make them aware of the responsible contribution to the pair-talk with interactional turn-taking in the target language. For this reason, the map task is suitable for less experienced learners in pair talking.

I would now like to demonstrate how to introduce the information- transfer type task to the target students. First, the teacher should explain not only the precise direction of the task procedure but also the benefits that the students can attain through successful completion of the task (= pair work) should be explained by the teacher. Cooperative work through active turn-taking is needed for the task to be completed successfully. Second, the teacher should take into account partner's respective proficiencies. The most effective pairing is likely to assign the lower proficiency student to be the sender and the higher one to be the receiver. Third, the teacher needs to explain how to use interactional strategies effectively. As stated above, Japanese students generally tend to be passive in the group work. Ross suggests that this is because in Japanese culture 'which values modesty and in-group loyalty, such an inclination to accommodate interlocutor behavior can be taken as a normal and socially desirable' (Ross, 1988, p352). One possible strategy to overcome their such passive attitudes so that they can participate actively in turn-taking as much as possible is to teach them helpful interactional strategies in English both before a task is carried out and after the task has been completed so as to give feedback.

Concluding remarks

I have discussed some important factors that English teacher should take into account in setting up task-based pair/group works to promote interactional learner-learner talk in the classroom. Teachers should recognize that all pair/group work does not necessarily provide individual learner with equal opportunities to speak and consequently does not result in collaborative and interactional talk among the participants. In order to organize successful pair/group work that benefits different

learners whose proficiency levels vary in the class, teachers should give adequate direction and convey the importance of group work by carefully selecting tasks. In addition, how to combine pairs/groups with considering students' respective proficiency levels seems to be a key factor in teaching lower level Japanese students.

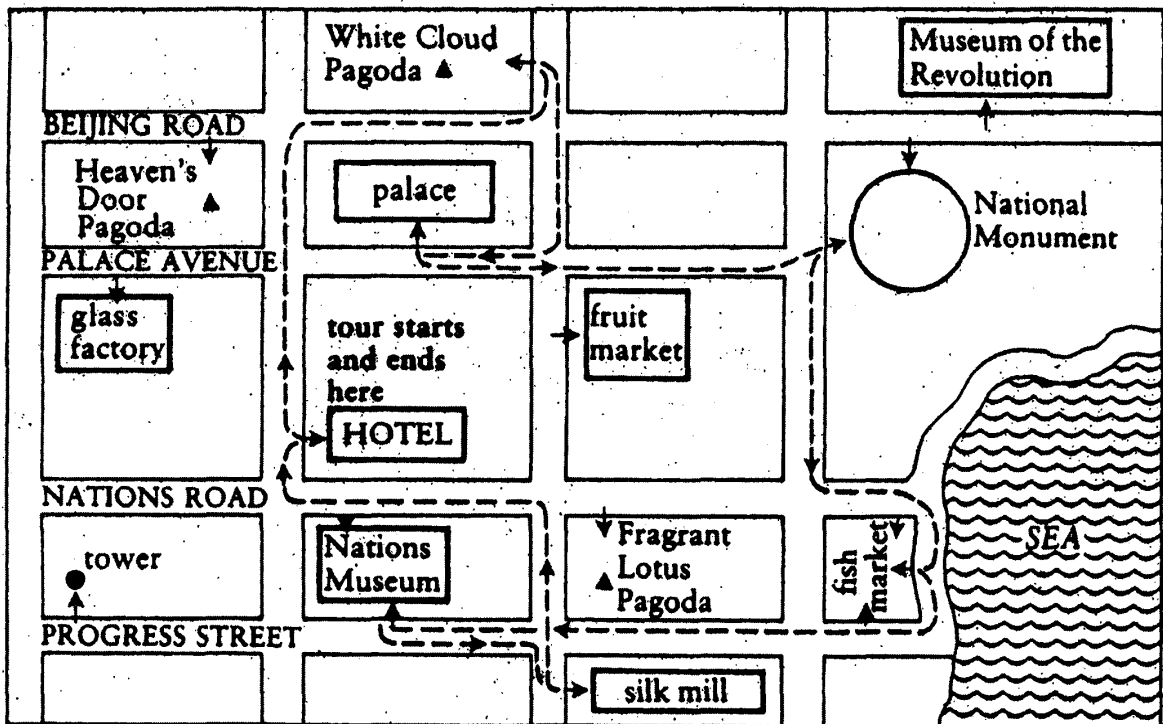
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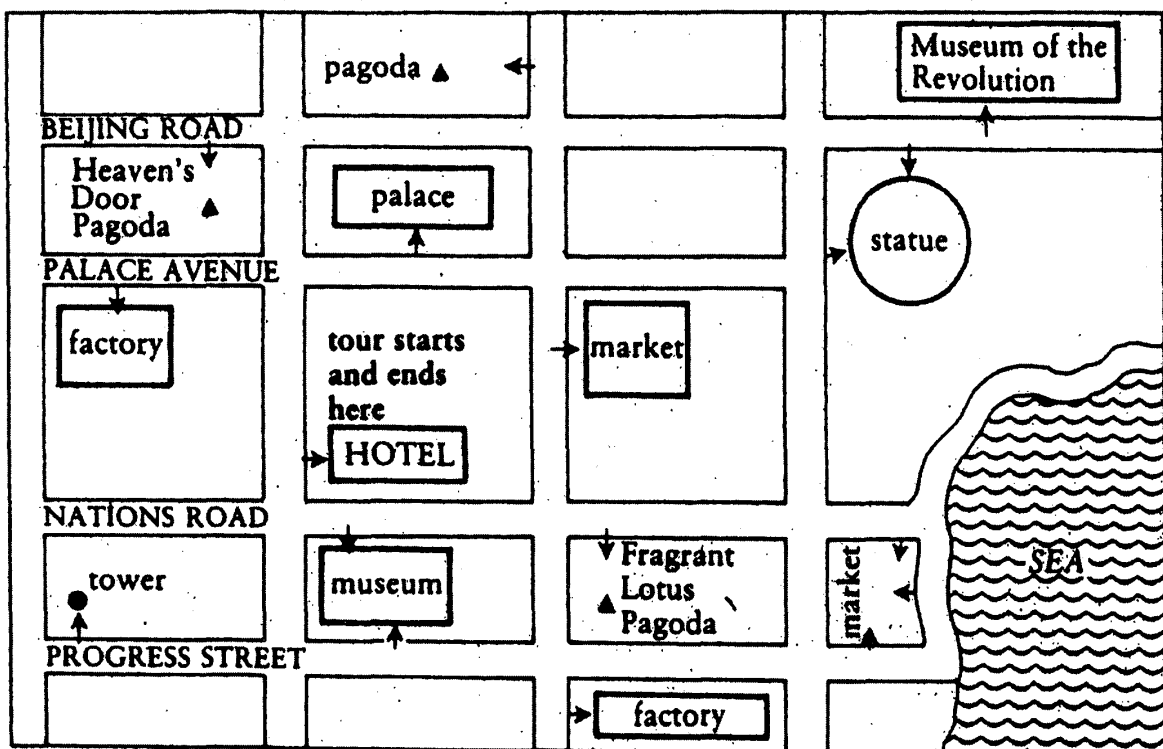
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Appendix 1 The Map Task 'Tai Tu City Tour'

The Sender's Map



The Receiver's Map



(Arrows on map indicate position of entrances to places of interest)