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Proceedings

Looking at Real World Tasks: Comparing Task-based and Skill-based Classroom Instruction

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In this study, we compare an analytic or task-based approach and a synthetic approach to syllabus design in developing student discussion abilities. Three different classes of freshmen students participated in weekly discussion activities over one semester. In the task-based approach, students in small groups watched others perform discussions, then rated, recorded and described examples of turn-taking language. In the synthetic syllabus, students heard the functional language for soliciting opinions, expressing agreement and disagreement and rehearsed the language in pairs.

The pre-test and post-test consisted of videotaped group discussions of five minutes which were rated by three native speakers for eye contact, gestures, turn-taking language, and discussion content. Groups using both approaches showed significant difference from their pre-test to post-test scores with greater improvement in content and turn-taking language than in eye contact and gestures.

今回の研究は，学生のディスカッション能力を向上させるためのシラバスに関して，(1) Analytic approach，もしくは Task-based approach と，(2) Synthetic approach を比較したものである。データは 3 クラスの大学一年生が一学期を通して週に一度行った活動によるものである。(1) Task-based approach によるシラバスでは，学生は小人数のグループに分かれて他グループのディスカッションを観察し，その後その turn-taking language（交替で発言する際の言語）の例を評価，録音，記述するという活動を行った。一方，(2) Synthetic approach では，学生は相手の意見を求めたり，意見に対する一致，不一致を表現したりするために，ディスカッションのための機能的な言葉を聞き，それをペアになって練習した。活動前と後のテストは，学生のグループ・ディスカッションを 5 分間ビデオで録画し，アイ・コンタクト，ジェスチャー，turn-taking language，ディスカッションの内容において，3 人の英語母国語話者が評価したものである。結果は次のようである。両方のアプローチによるシラバスで活動を行ったグループの活動前と後のテストに重要な差が現れており，特にアイ・コンタクトとジェスチャーよりもディスカッションの内容と turn-taking language において大きな進歩があった。

Two approaches to syllabus design

A useful distinction in conceptualizing options in syllabus design was initially made by Wilkins (1976; see also Long & Crookes, 1992; Nunan, 1988; Robinson, 1998a; White, 1988). This distinction refers to the learner's role in assimilating the content provided during group instruction and in applying it individually to real-world language performance and inter-language development. *Synthetic* syllabuses involve a focus on specific elements of the language system, often serially and in a linear sequence, such as grammatical structures, language functions or reading and speaking micro-skills. The easiest, most learnable, most frequent, or most communicatively important (sequencing decisions can be based on each of these ultimately non-complementary criteria, and on others) are presented before their harder, later learned, less frequent, and more communicatively redundant counterparts. These syllabuses assume the learner will be

able to put together, or synthesize in real-world performance, the parts of the language system (structures, functions, skills etc.) that they have been exposed to separately in the classroom.

In contrast, *analytic* syllabuses do not divide up the language to be presented in classrooms, but involve holistic use of language to perform communicative activities. One version of an analytic syllabus is adopted in task-based approaches to language teaching (see Hudson & Yoshioka, 1998; Long, 1985, in press; Norris, Brown & Robinson, 1998a, 1998b; Skehan, 1998). The learner's role in these syllabuses is to analyse or attend to aspects of language use and structure as the communicative activities require of them. This analytical learning is governed by: (a) the learners' developing *inter-language systems*; (b) their preferred *learning style* and *aptitude profile*; and (c) the extent to which they are themselves *motivated* to develop to an accuracy level which may not be required by the communicative demands of the task. Additionally, interventionist teacher techniques can be used during or following task performance to draw learners' attention to aspects of task performance that, non-target-like, are judged to be learnable and remediable (see Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long & Robinson, 1998). For these reasons, researchers have argued that analytic approaches to syllabus design, accompanied by focus on form techniques, are more sensitive to Second Language Acquisition (SLA) processes and learner variables than their synthetic counterparts. They have also claimed that such approaches do not subvert the overall focus on meaning and communication encouraged during classroom activity.

Our study represents an initial attempt to operationalize a task-based approach to the development of real-world academic oral discussion ability, in which students first performed academic oral discussions, before

"noticing" (Robinson, 1995; Schmidt, 1990), either during or following task participation, aspects of their performance that could be improved. Two groups operationalized this approach—one in which the post task noticing activities were frequent and structured (Group 2), and the other in which the activities were less frequent and less structured (Group 1). This latter group approximated to experiential learning through exposure alone, while the former implemented a greater number of interventionist teacher-led noticing activities.

We contrasted this approach with a more familiar and traditional synthetic EAP (English for Academic Purposes) syllabus, in which a third group of students (Group 3) were first taught academic discussion micro-skills (agreeing and disagreeing, exemplifying points, turn-taking procedures, for example); were next encouraged to practice these micro-skills; and were then asked to practice them further, largely in isolation from integrative whole task practice (see Table 1).

The students

The analytic or task-based approach and the synthetic approach to syllabus design were compared over one semester at Aoyama Gakuin University (eight classes delivering instructional treatments, and one class each for pre and post-testing). Three classes of 19, 20 and 21 students, each at an intermediate level of English language ability, participated in the study. The students were English majors in the first term of their freshman year. This was the first of two years in an integrated language skill program that combines 6 hours of weekly instruction in speaking, listening, writing, and reading.

Upon entering the program, the students take a language placement test and are grouped according to three

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Table 1

Operational distinctions between analytic and synthetic teaching

ANALYTIC	SYNTHETIC
1. Pre-Task Teacher helps students prepare for the task by describing the elements of a discussion: turn-taking, eye contact and gesture, phrasal or turn-taking language, and discussion content. Students view a video of others doing a discussion.	1. Presentation Teacher helps students prepare for task by providing them with an overview of the components of a discussion and examples of the types of functional language used: expressing agreement and disagreement, and soliciting opinions, etc. Mention is made of non-verbal elements of a discussion such as eye contact and gesture.
2. Task Students read the text and participate in a discussion.	2. Practice Students read the text and practice the appropriate language.
3. Post-Task: Observation and Self-Reflection Students watch other groups doing the task, compare groups, rate their efforts by viewing audio and video cassettes. Students prepare transcripts, identify examples of effective turn-taking language, and discussion content.	3. Production Students have discussions, and teacher gives them feedback.

different levels of ability. The curriculum is organized into themes at each of these levels, and students undertake a variety of tasks and activities such as writing journals and essays, reading and reporting on newspaper articles, doing book reports and oral presentations, and participating in small group discussions. In terms of a needs assessment, surveys of the students indicated that they wanted to do much more speaking in class and that they were frustrated because they felt they were unable to communicate with native speakers. At the same time, their teachers indicated that the most of the students had little ability to participate in discussions, even in Japanese.

The treatment

In the analytic or task-based approach, students in small groups of 3 or 4 persons worked on a weekly cycle of tasks (whole-group oral discussion), and then post-task activities that included self-reflection on their task performance, and/or group discussion of comments they made about their own and each other's performance using audio and video recordings of their group discussions. Group 2 performed more of these than Group 1. In the initial classes, a limited number of pre-task orienting activities were used by both task-based groups to orient students to the features of turn-taking, gesture, and language use, which they could profitably attend to and comment on throughout the rest of the semester in subsequent post-task noticing activities.

At the beginning of each class, groups of 3 or 4 students sat together and watched

other students performing discussions, noted the features of those discussions, and rated the group's performance. Selections from recordings of their own discussions were later transcribed by each set of group members and were used while they looked for examples of successful and unsuccessful phrasal or turn-taking language, and discussion performance, among other features of group discussion. The students then compared their observations with those of their classmates.

In contrast, students in the class following the synthetic, skills based syllabus (Group 3) learned about different kinds of functional language used in discussions such as soliciting opinions, expressing agreement and disagreement. The appropriate expressions were shown to the students, before they rehearsed them on a weekly basis in pairs, applying them to follow-up activities, with little opportunity for whole-task discussion practice.

Each week, all the students in the two task-based classes were randomly assigned to discussion groups of three or four persons. Pedagogy in the skills-based class largely involved individual and pair work. To ensure that both groups used topics of similar interest and difficulty, the discussion text *Impact Issues* was used in each class. About 45 minutes was spent on discussion activities during each week of the 8-week treatment. The issues selected for discussion were chosen according to the themes in the Integrated English Program.

The rating instruments
The pre-test and post-test consisted of videotaped group discussions of 5 minutes in length. The individual students in each discussion were scored by three experienced native speaker raters who averaged over ten years of EFL/ESL experience. The raters underwent a training session where they practiced use of the rating instrument (see Table 2 on the following page). In turn, the three ratings, from 1 to 5 on a 5-point scale, for each of four categories (turn-taking, eye contact and gesture, language use, content) were averaged. Inter-rater reliability was .76.

Results
Results of the repeated measures ANOVA (Group x Category x Pre- and Post-test) of the rating averages show no significant differences for the factor Group, but significant differences for Category and for Pre- and Post- test (p<.01). As can be seen in Figure 1, all groups improved from pre- to post- test, with greater improvement in the areas of content and language than in eye contact and gesture. A priori planned comparison revealed a significant difference on the post-test between task-based Group 1 and the superior skills-based Group 3. Task-based Group 2 and the skills-based Group 3 were equivalent.

Conclusion
Both structured task-based teaching, incorporating focus on form activities, and skills-based teaching were found to be equivalent, with skills-based teaching having advantages over unstructured experiential task-based learning. This is possibly due to transfer of training and expectations from prior language learning experience, since the skills-based approach is the most similar to our students' previous English learning experience in Japanese high schools. Longer-term studies of the effects of the different kinds of instruction are needed. Nonetheless, the results suggest that structured focus on form, plus extensive task practice is equivalent to carefully

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Table 2

Rating scale used to assess oral discussion tasks

Turn taking	Eye contact and gesture	Phrasal language	Discussion content
* (1) follows a predictable circular pattern, preceded by lengthy pauses.	* (1) minimal to no eye contact—no gestures.	(1) speakers simply state opinions—no phrases for agreement/ disagreement, or emphasis—no clarification requests.	* (1) uninteresting, un-engaging content no supporting details or examples—main points hard to identify.
* (2) follows a less rigid format, often preceded by lengthy pauses.	* (2) limited eye contact—often directed at one person when speaking—may look down or away if not speaking—gestures are rare.	* (2) no variety in the phrases used to agree/disagree and emphasize— clarification requests are rare.	* (2) main points identifiable— content predictable- few supporting details and examples.
* (3) fairly spontaneous and unplanned, hesitations and pauses still occur.	* (3) eye contact maintained, but not used for turn taking, or emphasizing points—some rhetorical and spontaneous gestures.	* (3) varied use of fixed phrases— occasional clarification requests and confirmation checks.	* (3) main points supported by details and examples— imaginative and interesting— listeners occasionally smile and laugh.
* (4) fairly spontaneous, with few pauses.	* (4) good even distribution of eye contact—follows eye contact signals to participate- gestures accompany agreeing/ emphasizing etc.	* (4) a greater variety of phrases and speech acts— confirmation checks and clarification requests are common.	* (4) interesting and thoughtful—main ideas and examples are clearly distinguished— often surprises, amuses or otherwise stimulates listeners.
* (5) no obvious pattern, and no pausing.	* (5) even, confident distribution of eye contact—uses appropriate gestures—when listening uses gestures and other cues to take the floor.	* (5) a rich, natural variety of non-formulaic phrases—uses comprehension checks and clarification requests.	
A_ B_ C_ D_	A_ B_ C_ D_	A_ B_ C_ D_	A_ B_ C_ D_

Interaction Bar Chart
Effect: Discussion subtests * Pre/posttest * Class
Dependent: Discussion
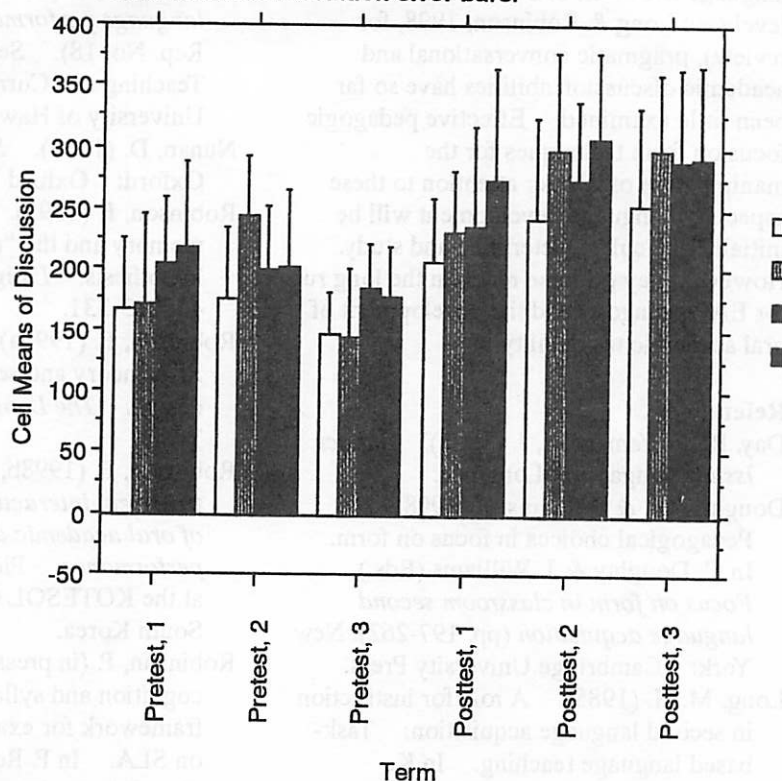**With Standard Deviation error bars.**

Figure 1.
Results of the Repeated Measures ANOVA

targeted and sequenced micro-skills teaching. This is a promising finding.

Non-verbal aspects of discussion abilities—particularly turn-taking ability—are the least susceptible to instruction over the short term, in all conditions. It is not clear yet whether these are best acquired incidentally, over a longer period, compared to verbal aspects which may benefit more from an explicit, intentionally directed focus of learner attention, and subsequent rehearsal and memorization. Alternatively, students may have felt more motivated and focused on verbal aspects at the expense of non-verbal aspects.

One practical concern regarding classroom research of this kind is to ensure a fair and accurate assessment of the different groups. This is made more difficult in this case by the use of videotaping for pre- and post-test assessments. There must be careful consideration of such details as stationary cameras and microphones; camera distance from the student groups; the placement of students so that their faces and upper bodies are entirely visible on camera in order to assess eye contact and gesture; and the positioning of groups in the room so that natural light from windows does not affect filming. Finally, discussion lengths, preparation time, and the use of notes while speaking must be controlled for, i.e., made uniform between groups. This is important because students referring to notes will speak more confidently, but use less eye contact and

gesture.

Finally, while research into focus on form has begun to show positive results for improvement in structural aspects of language use at the sentence and discourse level (see Long & Robinson, 1998, for review), pragmatic conversational and academic discussion abilities have so far been little examined. Effective pedagogic focus on form techniques for the manipulation of learner attention to these aspects of language development will be initially difficult to determine and study. However, they promise much in the long run for EAP pedagogy and the development of oral academic task ability.

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