Focused communication tasks and second language acquisition

Junko Nobuyoshi and Rod Ellis

This article reports a small-scale study which provides some evidence to suggest that 'pushing' learners to produce more accurate output, by the teacher making requests for clarification, contributes to acquisition. It also demonstrates how this might be achieved by using focused communication tasks as part of classroom pedagogy.

Introduction

Communication tasks have been defined as tasks that 'involve the learner in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form' (Nunan, 1989: 10). They contrast with other, more traditional language tasks, that require learners to pay attention to specific linguistic properties (phonological, lexical, or grammatical) in order to learn them or to practise using them more accurately.

The pedagogic rationale for the use of communication tasks rests in part on the claim that they will help to develop learners' communicative skills and in part on the claim that they will contribute to their linguistic development. In other words, communication tasks are important for both 'fluency' and 'accuracy' (Brumfit, 1984). They aid fluency by enabling learners to activate their linguistic knowledge for use in natural and spontaneous language, such as when taking part in a conversation. One way in which this is achieved is by developing strategic competence, defined by Canale (1983) as the verbal and non-verbal strategies used to compensate for breakdowns in communication and to enhance the effectiveness of communication. They contribute to accuracy (i.e. linguistic competence) by enabling learners to discover new linguistic forms during the course of communicating, and also by increasing their control over already-acquired forms.

Second language acquisition researchers have suggested a number of ways in which communicating can lead to acquisition. According to the interaction hypothesis (Long, 1983), learners acquire new forms when input is made comprehensible through negotiating for meaning, as in this example (Young and Doughty, 1987: 213):

NS: Do you wear them every day?
NNS: Huh?
NS: Do you put them on every day?

Here the native speaker (NS) asks a question which the non-native speaker (NNS) does not understand. This leads the NNS to negotiate for...
meaning by means of a clarification request, which in turn causes the NS to paraphrase her initial question. Such negotiation may help to make new forms and their meanings transparent in the input, with the result that they can be more easily acquired. According to the comprehensible output hypothesis (Swain, 1985), acquisition takes place when learners are ‘pushed’ into producing output that is more grammatical, as in this example:

NNS: He pass his house.
NS: Sorry?
NNS: He passed, he passed, ah, his sign.

Here the NS negotiates for meaning—by means of a clarification request—when she fails to understand the non-native speaker’s initial utterance, causing the learner to reformulate the utterance.

The purpose of this article is twofold. It aims to report a small-scale study that provides some evidence to suggest that ‘pushing’ learners to produce more accurate output does indeed contribute to acquisition—as claimed by the comprehensible output hypothesis. It also aims to illustrate how this can be achieved by means of focused communication tasks and to consider the place of such tasks in language pedagogy.

Communication tasks have the following characteristics (Ellis, 1982):

1. there must be a communicative purpose (i.e. not just a linguistic goal),
2. there must be a focus on message rather than on the linguistic code,
3. there must be some kind of ‘gap’ (e.g. an information or opinion gap),
4. there must be opportunity for negotiation when performing the task,
5. the participants must choose the resources—verbal and non-verbal—required for performing the task (i.e. they are not supplied with the means for performing the task).

Individual tasks can be more or less ‘communicative’, depending on whether all or just some of these characteristics are present.

A distinction can be drawn between focused and unfocused communication tasks. In the case of the latter, no effort is made in the design or the execution of a task to give prominence to any particular linguistic feature. The language used to perform the task is ‘natural’ and only very broadly determined by the content of the task. For example, a one-way picture description task that requires a learner to recount the information shown in a series of pictures to the teacher or another learner and, ultimately, to work out the story is an unfocused communication task, because there is nothing in the task that requires the participants to attend to or use specific linguistic features.

A focused communication task, in contrast, does result in some linguistic feature being made prominent, although not in a way that causes the learner to pay more attention to form than to meaning. Communication tasks can become focused either through design or through methodology. Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1990) observe that ‘different tasks can put
different requirements on particular grammatical knowledge, and it is correspondingly possible to construct tasks which involve grammatical knowledge in various ways and to varying degrees. They distinguish tasks in which the use of a particular grammatical structure is 'natural', those in which it is 'useful', and those in which it is 'essential'. In a communicative task that is fully focused, the grammatical structure must be essential (i.e. its use is required by the task), but as Loschky and Bley-Vroman acknowledge, such tasks are difficult to construct, especially if the aim of the task is learner production.

The inherent redundancy of language and the availability of rich contextual clues in many tasks obviate the need for learners to use any particular grammatical structure. For this reason, most production tasks are focused only to the extent that a particular structure is 'useful' or 'natural' and, as a consequence, may not actually result in its use.

It may be possible, however, to bring about a substantial degree of focus in the performance of a communication task through the manner in which it is carried out—that is, through methodology rather than design. Consider the one-way picture description task outlined above. Let us imagine that a learner is performing the task with a teacher and is given these instructions after receiving the pictures: 'The pictures tell a story about what happened last weekend. Tell me about your pictures'. These instructions make the use of the past tense 'natural', but by no means 'essential'. If, however, the teacher deliberately requests clarification of any utterance the learner produces containing a past tense error—irrespective of whether the teacher has or has not understood the utterance—the use of the past tense becomes a focus of the task. From the teacher's perspective, the task is not a truly communicative one, as the focus has shifted from message to code (see characteristic 2 of communication tasks above). However, from the learners' perspective the task remains communicative providing, of course, that they treat the teacher's request for clarification as a demand to improve the quality of the message rather than to display correct language.

The two examples below were taken from an actual performance of a one-way picture description task by a teacher and a learner. Although we cannot be sure that the learner did not become 'conscious' of the need to pay attention to the past tense, there was nothing in the actual discourse—or indeed, in the overall performance of the task—to suggest that this was the case. The learner appears to be focused on conveying meaning. However, when faced with a request for clarification, she responds by correcting her past tense error:

1 Learner: Last weekend, a man painting, painting 'Beware of the dog'.  
Teacher: Sorry?  
Learner: A man painted, painted, painted on the wall 'Beware of the dog'.

2 Learner: He pass his house.  
Teacher: Uh?  
Learner: He passed, he passed, ah, his sign.
In effect, the learner is being ‘pushed’, in the course of trying to communicate, to produce utterances that employ correct use of the grammatical feature (i.e. past tense) which the teacher, unknown to her, has elected to focus on.

Focused communication tasks, in particular those where the focus is achieved methodologically, offer the teacher a means of ‘teaching’ grammar communicatively. Such tasks provide a means of encouraging learners to produce output that is comprehensible and, at the same time, grammatically correct. The question that arises is ‘Do such tasks contribute to acquisition?’.

**The study**

The purpose of the study was to undertake a preliminary investigation of whether methodologically focused communication tasks lead to more accurate learner production that is sustained over time. Two research questions were addressed:

1. Does ‘pushing’ learners by means of requests for clarification result in more accurate use of past tense verb forms in communication?
2. Do learners continue to show improved accuracy in the use of past tense verb forms in subsequent communication when there is no attempt to ‘push’ them?

**Subjects**

Six subjects participated in the study. They were all adult learners of L2 English enrolled in weekly-held conversational classes at Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages in Tokyo. They were of fairly low-level proficiency, but all of them were capable of using at least some past tense verb forms correctly.

**Tasks and procedure**

The subjects performed two picture jigsaw communication tasks of the kind described in the previous section. The subjects were told that the pictures they held described events that happened the previous weekend (for task 1) and the day before at the office (for task 2). They performed the tasks individually with their regular teacher.

Three of the subjects comprised the experimental group and the other three the control group. All the subjects performed the two tasks twice. On the first occasion the experimental group received requests for clarification every time they produced an utterance in which the verb was not in the past tense, or the past tense was incorrectly formed. On the second occasion, however, they received only general requests for clarification (i.e. when the teacher genuinely failed to understand something they had said) and never when an utterance contained an incorrect verb form. The subjects in the control group received general requests for clarification, none of which followed an utterance containing a verb incorrectly marked for past tense, on both occasions. There was a one-week interval between the two occasions for both groups. To ensure that the subjects did not practise performing the task in the intervening week, they were not told that they would be asked to repeat them.
To confirm that the tasks did provide a natural context for the use of the past tense, baseline data from two native speakers were collected. These showed that except when background information (e.g. concerning the personality of one of the characters shown in the picture) was being provided, the task did indeed result in use of the past tense.

**Analysis**

The oral interactions between the teacher and the individual learners were recorded and transcribed in normal orthography. Obligatory occasions for the use of the past tense were then identified. This led to some of the learners' utterances being excluded from the analysis, as when the sequence of events was interrupted by background information (e.g. 'Last weekend a man was painting a sign. He has a dog. The dog is dangerous. So he painted 'Beware of the Dog'). For each obligatory occasion a learner was scored as supplying or not supplying the correct past tense verb form. If a learner successfully self-corrected in the course of producing an initial utterance, he/she was credited as supplying the past tense form. In the case of the experimental group on the first occasion, all utterances that were subsequently reformulated as a result of the teacher's focused requests for clarification were examined to determine whether the learner had corrected the original past tense error.

**Results**

Table 1 gives the total number of obligatory occasions for the use of the past tense by each learner together with the number of occasions it was used correctly and incorrectly and the percentage of correct and incorrect use on both occasions. In the case of the experimental group, the number of times the learners correctly reformulated initially incorrect past tense verbs during the first administration of the task is also given, together with a revised percentage of correct forms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Experimental 1</th>
<th>Experimental 2</th>
<th>Learners 3</th>
<th>Learners 1</th>
<th>Control 2</th>
<th>Control 3</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td><strong>First administration:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Obligatory occasions</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% correct</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correctly reformulated</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% correct after reformulation</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Second administration:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Obligatory occasions</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>62</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the learners produced a substantial number of errors in the use of the past tense during the first administration of the task. In the case of the experimental learners the teacher's requests for clarification led to two of the learners reformulating their utterances in a way that corrected their past tense errors. However, the third learner paid less attention to past
tense verb forms in his reformulations, correcting hardly any of his original errors.

The two experimental learners who had successfully reformulated their utterances to increase the use of correct past tense verb forms during the first administration of the task sustained the gain in accuracy during the second administration, even though on this occasion the teacher made no attempt to 'push' them into correct use. Both learners improved on their initial level of accuracy, learner 1 moving from 31 per cent to 89 per cent, and learner 2 from 45 per cent to 62 per cent. The third learner, however, showed no overall gain in accuracy. Neither did any of the learners in the control group.

**Discussion**

This study provides some support for the claim that 'pushing' learners to improve the accuracy of their production results not only in immediate improved performance but also in gains in accuracy over time. Two of the learners in the experimental group showed significant gains in accuracy, whereas none of learners in the control group did so. This augurs well for the comprehensible output hypothesis. However, one of the experimental learners failed to show any immediate or long-term improvement in the use of past tense verb forms. His level of accuracy remained essentially the same in his initial and reformulated utterances produced during the first administration and in the utterances he produced during the second administration. In other words, this learner did not seem to benefit from being 'pushed'.

One possible interpretation of the results is that 'pushing' learners to make their output more comprehensible leads to linguistic development only in some learners, while others do not benefit. A number of researchers (e.g. Meisel, Clahsen, and Pienemann, 1981; Clyne, 1985) have distinguished functionally- and structurally-oriented learners. The former tend to display good comprehension skills and have well-developed communication strategies. The latter have more interest in how language works, take greater efforts to keep the first and second languages separate, and are more inclined to engage in self-correction. It is possible that the first two learners in the experimental group were structurally oriented, while the third was functionally oriented. Thus, whereas the first two made efforts to improve the linguistic accuracy of their output when 'pushed', the third was content to simply get the message across. Such an interpretation is supported by an examination of the kinds of reformulations the third learner produced when the teacher requested clarification. These typically consisted of partial or complete repetitions of previous utterances, as shown in this example:

Learner: But he sleep. He becomes a sleep.
Teacher: Sorry?
Learner: But he sleep. He become asleep.

In other words, this learner was more concerned with general fluency than with accuracy. If this explanation is right, it suggests that the
comprehensible output hypothesis will need to be modified to take account of the type of learner.

This study was based on an extremely small number of learners and for this reason can only be considered exploratory. It will need to be replicated with a larger sample and with different linguistic features before any definite conclusions can be arrived at. The results it has provided, however, are intriguing.

Conclusion

One of the purposes of this article was to explain and illustrate what a focused communication task consists of. It is extremely difficult to bring about a focus on a specific linguistic feature while at the same time maintaining true ‘communicativeness’. Once learners realize that the task is intended to provide such a focus, they are likely to stop treating it as an opportunity to communicate and switch into a ‘learning’ mode. One way in which this can be prevented is if the focus is induced methodologically by means of requests for clarification directed at utterances containing errors in the feature that has been targeted. The data from the study reported above indicate that focusing in this way need not disturb the communicativeness of a task.

Methodologically-focused communication tasks, however, will only be of practical use if they can be used to ‘teach’ a range of different structures. It is not clear, yet, how possible this is. It is fairly easy to design a task that encourages the use of the past simple tense. It may also be possible, with ingenuity, to design tasks that afford opportunities for using such structures as present perfect, future forms, relative clauses and conditionals. But it is less clear whether they can be designed to ‘teach’ morphological features such as articles and third persons that are largely redundant, contributing little to the meaning of a message, or syntactic structures such as adjectival order and adverbial position, where, again, adherence to native speaker norms contributes little to message conveyance. As a number of second language researchers have suggested, it may be that certain types of grammatical features cannot easily be acquired through interaction (White, 1987).

It is also possible, as the study indicated, that some learners will not benefit much from being ‘pushed’ while interacting. This raises the question as to how these learners are to succeed in developing acceptable levels of grammatical accuracy. One answer might be to argue that it does not really matter if they remain grammatically incompetent, as long as they are communicatively competent. If there has to be a choice between the two, it is surely better to go for communicative skill. However, this might not satisfy some teachers. The alternative is to provide ‘formal’ instruction consisting of tasks designed to focus the learners’ conscious attention on specific linguistic features. Indeed, it is not the purpose of this article to suggest that focused communicative activities should replace traditional grammar work, only that, for some learners at least, it can serve as a way of helping them to acquire interactively.
Finally, it is necessary to consider in what way focused communication activities can aid ‘acquisition’. In this respect, it is useful to distinguish two meanings of acquisition—(1) acquisition as the internalization of new forms, and (2) acquisition as the increase in control over forms that have already been internalized. Arguably, the first occurs as the product of comprehending input, as claimed by the interaction hypothesis, while the second is aided by ‘pushing’ learners to improve their output, as claimed by the comprehensible output hypothesis. Focused communication tasks would seem better suited to increasing control than to ‘teaching’ new forms. They provide a means for encouraging learners to maximize their linguistic competence under real operating conditions.

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Notes
1 It is much easier to construct communicative listening tasks in which attention to a specific linguistic property is essential. This is because in listening tasks the designer rather than the learner has control over the linguistic content.

2 An obligatory occasion consists of an occasion when a learner creates a context that requires the use of a specific linguistic feature—irrespective of whether the feature is or is not actually used. For example, the following both constitute obligatory occasions for the use of the past simple tense:

Yesterday we visit the Tate Gallery.
Yesterday we visited the Tate Gallery.

3 It is interesting to speculate that different pedagogic techniques may be needed for (a) teaching new forms and for (b) helping learners acquire greater control over forms that they have already learnt, as the psycholinguistic processes involved in these two aspects of acquisition appear to be different. To some extent, this is already acknowledged in language pedagogy, as in the distinction commonly made between ‘skill developing’ and ‘skill using’ activities.

References

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