DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 447 712 FL 026 490

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TITLE Comparing Tasks and Skills in Developing Discussions.
PUB DATE 2000-03-15
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (Vancouver, BC, Canada, March 14-18, 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Style; College Students; *English for Academic Purposes; English (Second Language); Experiential Learning; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Individual Differences; *Learning Processes; Learning Strategies; Mediation Theory; Nonverbal Communication; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; *Teaching Methods; *Verbal Learning
IDENTIFIERS Content Area Teaching; Japan

ABSTRACT

Developing the skills necessary to participate in academic discussions is an important goal in many programs of English for academic purposes. However, there has been little empirical investigation into how verbal and nonverbal aspects of discussion abilities might be developed. This paper reports the results of a semester-long effect of instruction study at a Japanese university. Two methods of developing student discussions were employed: one, task-based, or derived from an analytic model of a syllabus design; the other, skill-based, from a more familiar synthetic syllabus. In addition, this paper also examines the interactions between learning discussion skills through task-based and skill-based approaches and measures of individual aptitude, anxiety, personality, and motivation. Research suggests a relationship between individual differences and success in language learning. Students learn discussion skills equally well under both task-based teaching models, incorporating focus-on-form activities, and traditional skills-based teaching in this study, with skills-based teaching having the slight advantage over the former. Three tables, "Operational Distinction between Task-Based and Skill-Based Approaches," "Sample Activities in the Task-Based and Skill-Based Approaches," and Rating Scale Used To Assess Oral Discussions," are included. (Contains 35 references.) (Author/KFT)

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Comparing Tasks and Skills in Developing Discussions

Developing the skills necessary to participate in academic discussions is an important goal in many programs of English for Academic Purposes. However, there has been little empirical investigation into how verbal and non-verbal aspects of discussion abilities might be developed. The present paper reports the results of a semester-long effect of instruction study at a Japanese university. Two methods of developing student discussions were employed: one, task-based, or derived from an analytic model of syllabus design; the other, skill-based, from a more familiar synthetic syllabus.

In addition, this paper also examines the interactions between learning discussion skills through task-based and skill-based approaches and measures of individual aptitude, anxiety, personality and motivation. Research suggests a relationship between individual differences and success in language learning.

I. Two Approaches to Syllabus Design

A useful distinction in conceptualizing options in syllabus design was made initially by Wilkins (1976; see also Long & Crookes, 1992; Nunan, 1988, Robinson, 1998a; White, 1988) and refers to the learner's role in assimilating the content provided during group instruction and applying it individually to real world language performance and interlanguage 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 Skehan, 1998; Long, 1985, in press; Norris, Brown, Hudson & Yoshioka, 1998; Robinson, 1998a, 1998b). The learner's role in these syllabuses is to analyze or attend to aspects of language use and structure as the communicative activities require them to, in line with: a) their developing interlanguage systems; b) preferred learning style and aptitude profile; and c) to the extent that they are 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 are non-target like, but 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 SLA processes and learner variables than their synthetic counterparts and do not subvert the overall focus on meaning and communication encouraged during classroom activity.

A pilot study (Robinson, Strong, Whittle & Nobe, in press) operationalized the two different methods of developing discussion skills over an 8-week period. The present study utilizes this task-based approach to the development of real-world academic oral discussion ability, in which students perform academic oral discussions, then during, or following task participation "notice" (Robinson, 1995; Schmidt, 1990) aspects of their performance that could be improved. We contrasted teaching this approach with teaching a more familiar and traditional synthetic EAP syllabus, in which students were first taught academic discussion micro-skills (agreeing and disagreeing, exemplifying points, turn-taking procedures, etc.), then were encouraged to practice them in pairs, largely in isolation from integrative whole task practice (see Tables 1, 2).

II. Personality, Aptitude, Anxiety, Motivation and Language Learning

Studies of language learning have investigated the relationship between measures of personality, aptitude, anxiety, motivation, and overall language proficiency. A number of investigators in second language acquisition have examined such personality traits as extraversion-introversion and neuroticism-stability as predictors of ability (Chastain, 1975; Rossier, 1975: Naiman, Froehlich, Stern & Todesco, 1978; Busch, 1982). However, in reviewing the literature on language learning and personality, Griffiths (1990) notes that many of these studies have had negative or inconclusive results. Griffiths suggests that either the relationships between language learning and a character trait, such as extraversion may not be that simple, or the nature of the tasks themselves may not be appropriately framed.

Carrell, Prince, and Astika (1996) measured the relationships between the personality types and academic performance of 76 Indonesian university students over a term. The researchers used the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and found correlations between extraversion and introversion and vocabulary and composite course scores. The researchers noted that the students with the higher proficiency scores were fairly evenly divided into introverts and extroverts. For both the first and second semesters, the students categorized as introverts did slightly better than the extrovert group.

Brown, Robson, and Rosenkjar (1996) investigated the relationship between the personality, aptitude, anxiety, and motivation in language learning of 320 Japanese university students and their language proficiency. The study used the Yatabe-Guildford Personality Inventory (Y/GPI), the Aptitude-Motivation Test Battery (A/MTB), the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL). The tests which classified students into high, middle, and low language proficiency suggested that well-balanced thinking styles and emotional stability were qualities of the higher proficiency language learners.

Many researchers have noted the importance of motivation in language learning, perhaps because of the long time needed to attain fluency (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Gardner, Tremblay & Masgoret, 1997; Skehen, 1989; Yamashiro & McLaughlin, 1999). Studies have shown a significant positive correlation between favourable attitudes, motivation and foreign language proficiency on achievement although differing methods and definitions make it hard to draw comparisons. In their study of 95 junior college students and 125 students, Yamashiro and McLaughlin (1999) found a significant correlation with the A/MTB and the language proficiency of the students. Ozek and Williams (1999) found different motivational factors in

their study of 220 females and 325 males from middle class schools.

The present study examined the interactions between scores on the MPI, A/MTB, and FLCAS tests and the performance of students in the task-based and skill-based experimental conditions as well as those of the control group. In summarizing the experimental findings, Griffiths (1990) noted one difference between introverts and extroverts: the former opted for accuracy in carrying out a task; the latter for the possibility of choice. Other differences concern the speed and flexibility favored by extreme extraverts and the reliability and accuracy of the extreme introverts, Furneaux, (1962, cited in Griffiths, 1990: 89). Eysenck (1978) suggests that once the strengths and weaknesses of particular individual differences are determined, these can be used in devising appropriate teaching to make use of them or to obviate them. With the present study, we wished to see whether either of the experimental conditions favored a particular personality or learner profile regarding aptitude, anxiety, and motivation.

III. The Students

The analytic or task-based approach to syllabus design, the synthetic approach, and a control group were compared over one semester at Aoyama Gakuin University (nine classes delivering instructional treatments, and one class each for pre and post-testing). Six classes of 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 skills 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, primarily of listening and grammar and are grouped according to three 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.

IV. The Treatment

In the analytic or task-based approach, students in small groups of 3 or 4 persons worked on a weekly cycle of task (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 others performance using taped audio and video recordings of their group discussions. In the initial classes, a limited number of pre-task orienting activities were used in the task-based groups to introduce students to the features of turn-taking, gesture, and language use that 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 each discussion, and rated each group's performance. Selections from recordings of their own discussions were later transcribed by each set of group members and later examined for examples of successful and unsuccessful phrasal or turn-taking language, or discussion performance, etc.) They compared their observations with those of their classmates.

In contrast, students in the classes following the synthetic, skills-based syllabus

learned about different kinds of functional language used in discussions such as soliciting opinions, expressing agreement and disagreement. Some non-verbal micro-skills were also taught, including eye gaze, gaze direction, certain gestures and features of turn-taking. The appropriate expressions and non-verbal micro-skills were shown to the students and they rehearsed them on a weekly basis in pairs, applying them to follow-up activities, with little opportunity for whole task discussion practice. The teacher circulated from group to group during these activities, giving feedback to the students. Although a new speaking micro-skill was introduced each week, there was also some recycling of previously learned material.

Each week, students in the 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 task-based and skill-based groups used topics of similar interest and difficulty, a discussion text Impact Issues was used in each class. About 60 minutes was spent on discussion activities during each week of the 9-hour treatment. The issues selected for discussion were chosen according to the regular themes in the Integrated English Program.

Finally, students in the two control classes had an equal amount of instructional time as those in the task-based and skill-based classes. However, their syllabus was based on a widely-used conversation text, New Interchange 2.

V. The Rating Instruments

The pretest and post-test consisted of videotaped group discussions of 5 minutes in length. The individual students in each discussion were scored by 4 experienced native speaker raters (with graduate degrees in English education and TESOL and a mean length of ESL experience over ten years) who underwent a training session where they practiced use of the rating instrument (see Table 3). The four ratings, from 1 to 5 on a five point scale, for each of four categories (turn-taking, eye-contact and gesture, language use, content) were averaged.

The instrument used to measure personality in this study is the Maudsley Personality Inventory (MPI), based on Eysenck's theory of personality (See Griffiths, 1990). This test distinguishes students on the two dimensions of extroversion/introversion, neuroticism/stability, and a third dimension, social lying. The latter is the extent to which students give socially appropriate answers.

The third instrument was the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (A/MTB) developed by (Gardner, 1985) on the premise that successful language acquisition depended upon learners' attitudes toward the target community. Much of Gardner's subsequent studies of motivation among English-Canadian students learning French established correlations between high scores on the A/MTB and high levels of proficiency. Regardless of language aptitude, motivated students were more likely to acquire a second language and to study longer than students with less motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). As opposed to the version of the A/MTB used by Brown, Robson and Rosenkjar (1996) who altered items that referred to French and French-Canadians to the English language and to Americans, the A/MTB was translated into Japanese and items changed to refer to English speakers as well as Americans (ie. Australians, British, Canadians, etc.) and to other English-speaking countries, in addition to America (ie. Australia, Britain, Canada, etc.) (Suzuki, 1999). In the present study, the researchers used the Likert-scale items from the A/MTB for the following variables: attitudes toward native English speakers living in Japan, attitudes toward native English speakers in general, interest in foreign languages, interest in learning foreign languages, integrative orientation, parental encouragement, instrumental orientation, attitudes toward English and classroom anxiety.

The fourth instrument in this study is the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) (Japanese version, Suzuki, Ibid). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope, J. (1986) initiated

research into classroom anxiety as an independent variable, noting that the relationship between classroom anxiety and learning is neither linear or inverse. In some cases, a little anxiety can be motivating to some students as well as debilitating to others. Items on this instrument gauge anxiety in the language classroom (ie. how a student feels about being corrected by the teacher).

VI. Results

One of the skill-based groups had to be dropped from the study due to equipment failure in recording the post-test. Therefore, there were three experimental groups (1 of skill-based, 2 of task-based) and two of control. Results of the repeated measures ANOVA (Group x Category x Pre-Post-test) of the rating averages shows a significant difference for the factor Group ($p<.01$). The two experimental groups improved from pre to post-test but the control group did not (see Table 4). There was a total of 16 possible points for each of the language elements: turn-taking, eye contact, language use, and content. In turn-taking, the skill-based group gained 4.5 points; the task-based group, 2.5; the control group, .5. In eye contact, the skill-based group gained 2 points; the task-based group, 2; the control group, no gain. Next, in language use, the skill-based group gained 4.5 points, the task-based group, 3.5; the control, less than .5. Finally, in discussion content, the skill-based group gained 3.5 points; the task, 3.5; the control, 1.5 for the only significant gain made by this group.

In terms of the measures of personality, aptitude, anxiety, motivation, numerous students had to be dropped from the study group. One skill-based class was omitted, as mentioned earlier, because the videotaped post-test could not be used. Other students had to be dropped because they missed a class where they were supposed to fill one of the measuring instruments.

However, there were numerous significant correlations with the remaining students (See Table 5). First, there was a negative correlation for the control group on turn-taking gain and the memory subscale of the A/MTB of -.33. Second, there was a significant positive correlation for the skill group for eye contact gain and the subscales of grammatical sequencing .52, phonetic encoding, .45, and total aptitude, .52 on the A/MTB. Third, there was a positive correlation of .30 between turn-taking gain and neuroticism on the MPI for the control group. Fourth, as for interactions between the motivational subscales of the A/MTB and the control group, there were significant negative correlations of -.36 of eye contact gain and Integration 2# and -.34 for discussion content gain and Integration 2#. Fifth, on the motivational subscale of the A/MTB, the skill-based group showed strong negative correlations between language gain and Integration 1#, -.50, Integration 2#, -.53, Motivation 1#, -.65; content gain and Integration 2#, -.57, content gain and Motivation 1#, -.57, and total gain and Integration 1#, -.59, and total gain and Motivation 1#, -.62. Sixth, on the same subscale, the task group showed a negative correlation of -.33 for language gain and Integration 3#, language gain and Motivation 3#, -.40; content gain and -.42 for Integration 3#, -.37, Motivation 1#, -.38, Motivation 3#, -.33, English class; -.33, total gain and Integration 3#, -.33, Motivation 3#.

VII. Conclusion

Students learn discussion skills equally well under both task-based teaching, incorporating focus-on-form activities, and traditional skills-based teaching in this study, with skills-based teaching having slight advantages over the former. Possibly, this is due to transfer of training and expectations from prior language learning experience, since the skills-based approach is most similar to our students' previous English learning experience in Japanese high schools. Longer term studies of the effects of our different kinds of instruction are needed. Nonetheless, the

results are promising in that they suggest that structured focus on form, plus extensive task practice is equivalent to carefully targeted and sequenced micro-skills teaching.

One practical concern regarding this kind of classroom research is to ensure a fair and accurate assessment of the different groups, more challenging 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, familiarity with the equipment, frequent tests of the equipment and proper training of any assistants, 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 placement of groups in the room so that natural light from windows does not affect the filming. Finally, discussion lengths, preparation time, and the use of notes while speaking must be uniform between groups. In the latter case, students referring to notes will speak more confidently, but use less eye contact and gesture. The use of notes must therefore be controlled for in pre and post-test video recordings.

As for the interactions in this study, these suggested several possibilities. To begin with, the results for the A/MTB suggest the following. The significant negative correlation between turn-taking gain and memory in the control group may indicate that the weakest students, the ones with the lowest scores for memory in language learning, gained the most over a term of English instruction. They were the weakest students and had the most potential for any gains. This was reflected in their turn-taking which might suggest that they felt more confidence in turn-taking. As for the positive correlation between students in the skill group with grammatical sequencing, phonetic encoding and total aptitude, this is as might be expected. The students with language learning strengths would benefit from this more traditional type of language teaching, that of a skill-based, teacher-centered class. Most interestingly, the task group proved to be neutral on this measurement scale of student aptitude. In summary, more individual difference interactions were found with the control group and skill-based group gain scores than with the task-based group scores. This suggests the potential superiority of the task-based approach in this situation as it did not favor any particular individual difference profile.

The MPI showed only one relationship, that of neuroticism with eye contact gain, perhaps associating eye contact use with slightly more impulsive students. FCLAS indicated no significant correlations which may reflect the limitations of the scale for use with local conditions. Debilitating or even motivating anxieties for a particular group might have to be determined by prior interviews and subsequent adjustment of the FCLAS before its use.

The motivational subscale of the A/MTB showed many negative correlations with questions relating to Integrative Orientation, or to what degree the subject identified with native English speakers. For both the skill and task groups, those students with lower identification with the target of native English speakers and with lower motivation improved significantly, yet another indication of the effectiveness of the two approaches. In this regard, it is worth noting how the fewer and weaker correlations with the control group after some nine lessons.

Ultimately, while focus on form research 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 learning will be initially difficult to determine and study although they promise much for improvements in instructional methods. As more is learned about precisely which characteristics of a good language learner are most important in language acquisition, rating instruments need to devised that exploit this knowledge. Both developments promise much in the long run for EAP pedagogy and the development of oral academic task ability.

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Table 1 Operational Distinctions Between Task-based and Skill-based Approaches

TASK-BASED	SKILL-BASED
1. Pre-Task For the first two sessions only, the teacher helps students prepare for the discussion task by describing the elements of a discussion: turn-taking, eye contact and gesture, phrasal or turn-taking language, and discussion content. Identifying the elements, students view and rate a video of others doing a discussion.	**1. Presentation** In all sessions the teacher presents selected components of a discussion and examples of functional language used, ie. expressing agreement and disagreement, and soliciting opinions. Rules and examples of nonverbal elements of a discussion such as turn-taking procedures, appropriate use of eye contact and gesture are also introduced and described.
2. Task In each session students are randomly allocated to groups of 4 or 5 to read the text and participate in a discussion.	**2. Practice** In each session students read a text and individually or in pairs practice the appropriate language and skills introduced earlier in the presentation phase. Functionally language and discussion skills are introduced separately, in series over the semester.
3. Post-Task: Observation Students watch themselves and other groups doing the task, compare groups, rating each group's performance.	**3. Production** Students do further individual and pair work exercises and the teacher gives correction and feedback.

Table 2: Sample Activities in the Task-based and Skill-based Aproaches

Whole Task Activities	Skill-based Pair and Class Activities
1. Students prepare transcripts and by reading and commenting upon them, focus on form. 2. While engaged in small group discussion, students are rewarded with a counter or poker chip each time they take a turn. The winner had the most chips. 3. To sensitize themselves to eye contact, students participating in a discussion, draw slips of paper identifying them as high or low eye contact. Afterward, members of the group have to guess who had which slip. 4. In a similarly-designed activity, students find themselves designated as high, low, or absent in their use of gestures.	1. As a class, students form a circle and play "wink murder." 2. Students learn how to use gestures by saying a word and doing the appropriate gesture 3. Using a check sheet, students count how many times they use a particular speech action.

Table 3. Rating Scale Used to Assess Oral Discussions

Rating Scale for Pre and Posttest Assessment of Discussion Ability

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, unengaging 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.	* (5) interesting, engaging content-clearly delivered- a high level of personal response and rationalization - listeners show surprise, amusement and high interest.
A___B___C___D___ E___	A___B___C___D___ E___	A___B___C___D___ E___	A___B___C___D___ E___

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Title: Comparing Tasks and Skills in Developing Discussion

Author(s): Peter Robinson, Gregory Strong, Jennifer Whittle

Corporate Source: Paper presented at TESOL 2000, Vancouver, March 15

Publication Date: ~~X~~ Presentation at TESOL 2000 Vancouver, March 15

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