Scripted and Unscripted Information Exchange Tasks: Two Approaches to Learner Negotiation in the Foreign Language Classroom

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This study examines communicative classsroom interaction based on scripted and unscripted tasks. 94 Japanese university students were assigned to two groups. One group, the scripted task group, used a communicative textbook which featured scripted dialogs, functional language practice and information gap-type exercises. The other group, the unscripted task group, used information exchange tasks which did not have any prescribed dialog at all. Students in this group were required to negotiate meanings using their own interlanguage. Two pre-tests were used to assess pre-treatment student ability; the Ilyin Oral Interview test and a narrative task. Students were retested at the end of the first semester with alternate forms of these tests. Treatments were switched at the beginning of the second semester. In addition to the language tests, course evaluations were done by the students at the end of both semesters to provide a qualitative perspective on the content of the classroom lessons. The Comprehensive English Language Test Structure Section was used at the end of the second semester. Results indicated that students found the scripted tasks to be more face valid, but less worthy of recommendation than the unscripted tasks. Test results indicated that students in the unscripted task group were more accurate in their use of interrogatives on the oral interview than were the scripted task group students. The analysis of student discourse indicated that there were dramatically more requests for clarification and referential questions in the uncripted task group discourse. These results suggest that information exchange tasks that encourage learners to negotiate freely are most beneficial to foreign language learners at the post-secondary level.

In the last decade communicative approaches to foreign and second language instruction have become popular (Brumfit and Johnson 1979; Brumfit 1984; Littlewood 1981). One recent development in communicative syllabuses is the so-called task or information gap approach to classroom practice (Breen 1987), which obtains empirical support in a large number of second language acquisition studies (Long and Porter 1985; Long and Sato 1983; Porter 1983; Pica and Doughty 1985; Pica. Young and Doughty 1987). To date, the focus of analysis in the task and information gap literature has been on comparing the characteristics of interlanguage talk with that of teacher talk. Teacher 'talk' is the modification and simplification of language directed towards learners; discourse and interaction are modified to facilitate comprehension (Sinclair and Brazil 1982; Long 1980; Gass and Varonis 1985). These empirical studies have been concerned with identifying the salient aspects of input from teacher to language learners and with identifying the processes of negotiation in teacher-learner and learner-learner interaction. These studies have

not approached the phenomenon of interlanguage talk from a pedagogical perspective, but have emphasized the relationship between the process of negotiation of meaning and second language acquisition.

Second language acquisition research findings have been translated into instructional materials that assume the process of negotiation among learners using the materials will be like the process of language acquisition outside of the classroom environment. That is, communicative materials have in recent years employed activities that require learners to exchange information. However, since the exchanges are by and large constrained by textual instructions, the amount of negotiation required to complete the tasks may well be qualitatively different from the negotiation which occurs in tasks that are not constrained by printed cues.

This study compares the quantity and characteristics of the negotiation in two approaches which encourage information exchange. One approach, based on scripted textual materials, is entirely guided by explicit cues and is introduced by dialogs that demonstrate language functions as they occur in various discourse settings. The learner's responsibility is to practice these functions and extrapolate from the dialogs and model sentences to information gap activities set in the textbook lessons. The second approach is based on information exchange that is unrehearsed and unaided by any textual cue. Learners must create their own dialog and must continually modify it during the process of information exchange.

The comparison of these two approaches to instruction is useful because it integrates analysis of interlanguage talk -- a continuing theme in second language acquisition research -- with a comparison of different methods intended for classroom instruction. The study also provides a basis for comparison of the discourse evolving from the manipulation of written text with discourse arising from unscripted negotiation of misunderstandings. The two approaches differ essentially on the point of what must be accomplished during the task. The text requires practice of structures and functions while the unscripted tasks do not prescribe the use of any particular structure or function.

Materials

The method comparison is based on two sets of materials. *1) Person to Person: Book One* (Richards and Bycina, 1984) was intended to be a text that provides learners with 'a conversational task or function that is practiced as an analog to language use in 'real life' (p.v.). An example of functional practice is:

Invite your partner to do three of the following things. He/she accepts.
1) Go skiing this weekend.
2) Meet you for lunch today.
3) Have dinner together next Saturday. [p. 45]

The functional practice intended is 'formal invitations: accepting and declining, and follows a group of model sentences.

An example of a conversational task in the text is:

Host: ask your partner questions about five of the famous people in the photographs.
Follow this example:
Host: Who's that?
Contestant: It's *Olivia Newton-John.*
Host: What's her nationality?
Contestant: She's *Australian.* [p. 39]

Here, the host (partner A) has information about the personalities that the contestant (partner B) does not have.

The unscripted tasks were based on various visual and object manipulation problems. For example, two learners sit back to back. bartner A instructs Partner B how to assemble a small snap-together toy. Partner B must assemble the pieces of the toy in the sequence given by Partner A and must do so without seeing the diagram of the construction steps. In order for Partner B to complete the construction process, he/she may need to clarify the steps that need to be taken.

Method

Two sections of Japanese college freshmen, each with 48 members, were randomly assigned to one of two treatment groups : The Unscripted Task Group (hereafter UTG) and the Scripted Task Group (STG). Each group was further divided into two sub-groups. Learners in each of the four sub-groups in the spring term became members of the alternate group in the fall term (see Figure 1, below).

The UTG was engaged in various visual and object manipulation tasks :

1) Video Summaries. Partner A can see a short video segment depicting an everyday social interaction. Partner B cannot see the video, but can hear the dialog. B must ask A for more information concerning the persons, the actions and the outcome of the video segment. The goal is for B to summarize the content of the video segment with as much accuracy as possible.

2) LEGO Assembly. Partner A receives pieces of a LEGO toy. Partner B gets the graphic assembly instructions. B instructs A as to the sequence of assembly and responds to A's questions about the various parts of the toy and its correct assembly.

3) Picture Manipulation. Both Partners A and B get identical sets of small pictures of various objects and people. Many of the pictures resemble each other. A and B take turns placing the pictures on their own desks in response to their partner's instructions. Sitting back to back, A and B create a pattern of pictures on their desk tops which should be identical.

4) Picture Drawing. Partner A receives a sheet of paper with graphic images of familiar objects on it. A must instruct B as to the exact location and dimensions of each picture, which B must then draw as accurately as possible. A and B sit back to back.

5) Sequential Story Telling. Partner A is shown a large photopraph depicting one part of a sequential story. Partner B must ask A for details about the content of the photograph. Partner A is shown photos 1 and 3, while B is shown photos 2 and 4. Sitting back to back, both partners must construct the sequential story based on descriptions of the content given by the partner in response to the questions asked.

The instructor's role during these tasks was to set the tasks without providing correction, or specific language practice. The instructor did, however, provide feedback on the factual accuracy of the learners' oral summaries of the content of the videos and picture sequence stories.

In the STG, the learners initially listened to taped dialogs between native speakers and model performances of the functions before doing the functional practice. The text supplied samples of language which were obligatory in the solution of the tasks in addition to information about how the task was to be organized. The text's emphasis on both language and procedure contrasts with the lack of emphasis on linguistic form in the UTG. When dealing with the STG, instructors directed the students' attention to salient points of usage before allowing the students to practice the functional dialogs and information exchange tasks.

Design (Figure 1)

Students were assigned to one of four groups. Two of the groups did the unscripted tasks during the first semester. The other two groups did the text. Two teachers took one section each of the UTG and STG so that both teachers taught one UTG and one STG per semester. Students were randomly assigned to one of two pre-test groups. One group (n=46) was pre-tested with an oral interview designed to elicit specific grammatical forms (Ilyin, 1976; Engelskirchen, et al. 1981, also see Duenas Gonzales, 1987). The other group (n=48) did a narrative discourse task based on the retelling of a Japanese folktale presented on video (Ross, 1987). Responses on learner cassettes were rated for their accuracy, fluency and pronunciation following administration in the language laboratory.

Learners in both groups were tested with alternate forms of the pretests at the end of the first semester. Treatment group assignments were switched at the start of the second semester so that learners who did the unscripted tasks in the first semester did the text in the second semester. At the end of each treatment term, all students were asked to complete a course evaluation which was designed to provide information about the learners' perceptions of the appropriateness of the materials, the use of time in class and usefulness of the activities.

Figure 1
Research Design
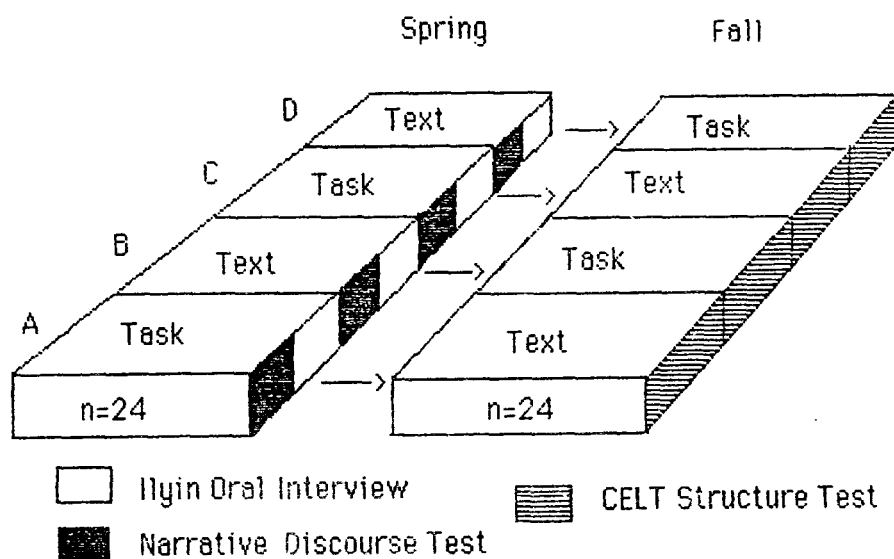
At the end of the second semester all learners took the Structure section of the CELT (Palmer and Harris, 1986), a seventy-five item test of grammar in context (see Oxford 1987).

In addition to the language test and survey data, learner interlanguage talk in both the UTG and the STG was recorded in the first semester. In all, 33 dyads were recorded and 3 to 5 minutes of continuous discourse were analyzed. This learner interlanguage talk was analyzed for the frequency of clarification and display questions. Clarification questions occur when one partner does not completely comprehend his/her partner's intended meaning and needs more information in order to move through the task successfully. Display questions, in contrast, are used to elicit information already known to the questioner. This may be particularly so when the task is pre-scripted. Question and answer routines in the text materials have the potential to be genuine requests for information. However, in many instances the answers to questions appearing in the text are pre-determined and may be knowledge both participants already share.

The equivalence of the two treatment groups was established by performing analyses of variance on both of the pre-tests. This strategy was used as a backup to the randomization process to support the validity of the interpretation of post-test results.

Hypotheses

A) The frequency of clarification questions versus display questions is predicted to be greater in the interlanguage talk of learners in the UTG compared to the STG. This prediction is based on research indicating a clear distinction between display and referential questions in teacher-fronted versus learner-centered classroom (Porter 1986 ; Long and Sato 1983). Even though in this study the role of the instructor was purposefully restricted to that of facilitator, the differences in interlanguage talk are predicted to correspond to the type of task. That is, scripted tasks found in the text would resemble teacher-fronted instruction in that there would be more display questions in learner dyads. Conversely, the unscripted information exchange tasks would produce more requests for clarification.

B) Assuming that Hypothesis A is supported, Hypothesis B predicts that specific aspects of interlanguage talk will be detectable in the post-test results. Specifically if there are differences in the number requests for clarification, group differences on the accuracy of the formation of interrogatives are predicted to be greater for the group that indeed asks more of these types of questions. Thus the quality of practice in question formation is predicted to have an effect on the subsequent acquisition of question formation.

C) No differences are predicted on the post-test of the Narrative Discourse Test. Since the task is a narration that does not require the learners to formulate interrogatives or interact with a partner, no specific group differences are predicted.

D) Likewise, on the CELT test no differences are expected since this test assesses a wide variety of structures and thus would not assess the ability formulate questions.

E) Learners in the UTG are predicted to give higher course evaluations than the STG. One basis for this prediction follows from Palmer's (1979) observation about the positive affective influence of gaming in language learning (see also Palmer and Rodgers, 1985).

Analysis

Unpaired t-tests were performed on the two post-test scores. The survey data was subjected to multivariate t-tests since there were a large number of items in the survey. Specific comparisons were made on a subset of the items appearing on the oral interview after the direct comparison of the group means on the total interview score proved to be significant. This strategy constitutes a post hoc analysis that is governed by an omnibus significance test. The analysis of these particular items on the oral interview, however, stems from observations made in analysis of the interlanguage talk data.

Results

Based on the unpaired t-tests, clarification requests appeared significantly more frequently than display questions in the Unscripted Task discourse.

Table 1

Clarification requests by group[*]

	Means	t-Value	P-Value	D.F.
Text (n=17)	.235	−7.75	<.0001	31
Task (n=16)	4.375			

[*] Hypothesis A (based on 33 recordings)

A mirror image of this result was found in the scripted tasks, with display questions occurring more frequently.

Table 2
Display questions by group

	Means	t-Value	P-Value	D.F.
Text (n=17)	7.000	6.424	< .0001	31
Task (n=16)	.375			

As far as specific unscripted tasks were concerned, clarification questions appeared most frequently during the LEGO task, followed by the picture drawing task and then the video task. As predicted, the text dialogs contributed least to the production of clarification questions. Examination of the two samples of interlanguage talk below suggest why this may be so. The two excerpts from the interlanguage talk recordings below demonstrate representative discourse from the two groups. (Note : the following excerpts contrast speakers by use of upper and lower case letters.)

Information Exchange Task : (video task)

NEXT HE... WHAT WHAT WHAT DOES HE DO ?

he... he looked around there and talked to a man ...asked and asked the same thing. the man had many coins so they change ... they changed money. HOW MANY PEOPLES ARE ... CHIGAU .. HOW MANY PEOPLES ARE THERE IN THE RESTAURANT .. HOW MANY PEOPLES THERE IN THE RESTAURANT ?

how many papers ?

PEOPLE .. people .. um many men there so ... I can't say how many men there.

IS HE TALL OR SHORT ?

pardon ?

IS HE TALL OR SHORT ?

he is tall ....

In the UTG (information exchange task), the primary source of language input comes from dyad partners. There is no textual reference for the partner's utterance. In the event of misunderstanding, one partner must seek to get his or her partner to clarify the preceding utterance. The example, based on the video description task, demonstrates how an inaccurately produced or perceived phoneme initiates what Varonis and Gass (1985) call a 'push down', or sequence of queries and clarifications necessary for resolution of the miscue.

The textbook 'quiz game' exercise, in contrast, shows that there is no perceived need for negotiation. It has the appearance of information exchange but completely lacks the substantive negotiation of normal conversation.

what is the capital of poland ? IT IS WARSAW, I'M NOT SURE. can you spell that ? W-A-R-S-A-W. very good. now, what is the capital of canada ? IT'S OTTAWA. can you spell that ? O-T-T-A-W-A. very good. now what's the capital of egypt ? IT'S CAIRO, BUT I'M NOT SURE. can you spell that ? C-A-I-R-O. very good, now what's the capital of germany ? IT'S BONN. can you spell that ? B-O-N-N. very good. now what is the capital of denmark ? IT'S LAGOS can you spell that ? L-A-G-O-S. very good and what is the capital of sri lanka ? IT'S COLOMBO. can you spell that ? C-O-L-O-M-B-O. very good .. owari

There is no lack of questioning going on, but even though the questioner knows the capital of Denmark is not Lagos, she perceives no need to inform her partner of this infelicity. What counts here is the formal properties of the utterance, not its truth value. In this sense the utterance violates an elemental rule of conversational exchange.

The examples of interlanguage talk above suggest that there are fundamentally different types of language practice going on in the two groups. It appears that even though there are ample opportunities to practice interrogative forms in the STG, this practice does not provide a basis for what Stevick (1976) has called 'depth' in learning. The questions are asked and answered because they are part of the lesson. There is little other motivation to repair misunderstandings or factual errors when responding to the interlocutor. By way of contrast, the unscripted task creates conditions for the clarification of meaning : there is a need to reformulate utterances and check the interlocutor for comprehension. It may well be that the type of practice done in the UTG provides the 'depth' necessary for language learning to take place.

In order to test the second hypothesis (B), an omnibus test of group differences was used (Table 3).

Table 3
Ilyin Oral Interview total score by group*

	Means	t-Value	P-Value	D.F.
Text (n=23)	21.04	-2.92	<.01	43
Task (n=22)	23.27			

* (reliability=.84)

Multivariate tests were also done on the subset of interrogative forms produced in the Ilyin Oral Interview. A T-square of 28.67 (p<.001) supports Hypothesis B. The two groups differ on the accuracy of interrogative forms.

The narrative task requires learners to watch an animated folk story for about eleven minutes before they provide a narration of a shorter version of the same story. The task requires learners to narrate the story in real time, and thus provides a rough measure of speaking ability. Ratings on pronunciation, accuracy and fluency are made on the tape-recorded sample of the learners' speech. As was predicted in Hypothesis C, no group differences emerged on the mid-term administration of the narrative test (Table 4). Neither of the two groups, the STG nor the UTG, did much narration during class. Since narration was not a factor in either of the two groups' activities, i.e., since the degree of conversational exchange was the focus of the study, this result is consistent with the prediction.

Table 4
Narrative Discourse Test by group*

	Means	t-Value	P-Value	D.F.
Text (n=22)	2.68	-.854	n.s.	4.3
Task (n=23)	2.87			

* (reliability=.74)

The CELT Structure test was given at the end of the second term after treatment groups had been rotated. Learners thus experienced both Unscripted Tasks and the Text. As predicted, no difference emerged (Table 5).

Table 5
CELT Structure Test by group*

	Means	t-Value	P-Value	D.F.
Text (n = 42)	70.7	.919	n.s.	83
Task (n = 43)	69.4			

* (reliability = .83)

The CELT measures a wide variety of grammatical structures in a conversational format. Although the UTG was not given specific structures to practice during their lessons, they performed at the same level of grammatical accuracy as the STG, which had the advantage of practicing conversational forms. This finding suggests that learners using a text which emphasizes formal practice over open-ended negotiation do retain the formal properties of the text in their interlanguage.

At the end of the fall semester all learners completed a thirty-item course evaluation. The evaluation covered several aspects of the classroom : the materials, the use of time, and the learners' rating of the appropriateness of the learning activities.

As was predicted, the UTG rated the information-exchange materials significantly more highly than the STG rated the textbook. A multivariate t-test indicated a significant difference between the groups' evaluation of the materials at the end of the semester (T-squared = 19.58, p.<.001, reliability = .89). This result may be related to the novelty of doing information exchange using materials which stimulate negotiated exchanges. However, as Table 6 suggests, appreciation of the materials does not necessarily translate into perception of their face validity. Table 6 summarizes items which distinguished the two groups.

Table 6

Breakdown by survey questions by group

♯ 23 'The content of the materials was good.'

	Mean	Standard Deviation	
Text (n = 46)	6.37	1.74	
Task (n = 45)	7.17	1.82	t = -2.15 (<.05)

♯ 30 'I would recommend these materials.'

	Mean	Standard Deviation	
Text (n = 46)	5.54	2.05	
Task (n = 45)	6.63	1.66	t = -2.79 (<.01)

♯ 1 'Ours was a college-level English class.'

	Mean	Standard Deviation	
Text (n = 46)	6.82	1.78	
Task (n = 47)	6.02	1.97	t = 2.05 p<.05

At the beginning of the second semester the treatments were reversed, so that learners in the UTG began using the text and the STG began using the unscripted tasks. This provides a basis for a retest of Hypothesis E. Learners in the second semester's UTG were expected to give higher ratings to their materials in the course evaluation. This prediction was not substantiated by the student ratings, however.

Multivariate t-tests were performed on the learners' responses to the second semester survey. No group differences emerged on the evaluation of materials (T-squared = 1.36, p>.05), although a significant group difference over the evaluation of lesson content was found (T-squared = 4.84. p<.002). By the end of the second semester, the text had apparently 'lost' some of its appeal as instructional material.

An unexpected perception of the teacher emerged in the second semester course evaluation. The UTG viewed the teacher as being more concerned with the activities (Table 7).

Table 7

Breakdown of survey questions by group

♯ 14 'The teacher paid attention to the students.'

	Mean	Standard Deviation	
Text (n = 40)	7.30	1.63	t test = – 2.33 (<.05)
Task (n = 45)	8.00	1.02	

During these tasks, the teacher was providing encouragement to the learners as they struggled with the negotiation of meaning. In contrast, since the text enforced a division between the teacher and the learners once the activity had been set up, the teacher was possibly perceived as more distant during the text-based practice than during the information exchange tasks.

Conclusion

The major finding of this research is that unscripted tasks are more likely to engender extended negotiation about the meaning of utterances than prescripted texts. A secondary finding is that unscripted tasks help learners to acquire interrogative forms without any specific instruction or focus; it appears that communicative necessity is the mother of use and possibly, of acquisition. The scripted tasks, although providing ample practice of interrogation and functional forms, did not appear to give the learners any advantage over the learners with no overt focus on form. The text appears to be a sophisticated medium for the introduction of useful grammatical and functional forms. However, it turns out to be less sophisticated in inducing the kind of interaction necessary for negotiation of meaning and reformulation of discourse than the relatively rough and tumble unscripted information exchange tasks.

In accounting for why these differences in discourse occurred, it may be useful to examine the level of control found in the prescripted texts and the unscripted tasks. In the texts, 'communication' is introduced in formulae which preempt the learners' need to negotiate about the intended meanings in the prescribed exchange. Learners can thus complete the communicative drills successfully without ever having to seek clarification of the interlocutor's intended message because the text has already fixed the route as well as the destination.

The text fundamentally replaces the teacher as source of direction and information. Thus it is not surprising that the high frequency of display questions between learners in text-focussed dyads reflects the high frequency of display question in teacher-fronted classrooms. Pair work with pseudo-communicative tasks clearly does not stimulate interactional modification. What does seem to facilitate genuine interactional modification among learners is the perception that meaningful discourse can be structured by the participants themselves.

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