Debate as a Task: From Perspectives of Negotiation of Meaning, Communication Strategies, and Strategic Competence

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Introduction

This study has investigated interaction among students in a debate activity to examine the effects of debate as a communicative activity on students' interaction. Especially, the present study compared four debate activities and analyzed interactions in these activities in terms of negotiation of meaning and the use of communication strategies (CSs) that are considered to facilitate interaction. By comparing and analyzing interaction in these debate activities, this study tried to offer effectiveness of the debate activity in language classroom.

Negotiation of meaning

One of the researchers who investigate a role of interaction in SLA is Long. He suggests the "Interaction Hypothesis" in his research (1996). The Interaction Hypothesis is defined by him as follows:

> "*negotiation for meaning*, especially negotiation work that triggers *interactional adjustments* by the NS or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways" (1996: 451-452).

Input, especially comprehensible input is recognized as an important factor in SLA. Comprehensible input appears to be generated from opportunities for negotiation for meaning. Negotiation for meaning which is considered as one factor in causing acquisition is defined by Long as follows: "process in which, in an effort to communicate, learners and competent speakers provide and interpret signals of their own and their interlocutor's perceived comprehension, thus provoking adjustments to linguistic form, conversational structure, message content, or all three, until an acceptable level of understanding is achieved" (Long 1996: 418). According to Ellis (1994), this negotiation work is defined in terms of negotiation of meaning. Negotiation of meaning is work that a L2 learner or an interlocutor attempts to remedy problems in understanding.

Negotiation of meaning is triggered by interaction adjustments. Interaction adjustments

are devices employed in the negotiation that "are used both strategically, to avoid conversational trouble, and tactically, to repair communication breakdowns when they occur" (Long, 1996). As examples of interaction adjustments, he shows the following devices: repetitions, confirmations, reformulations, comprehension checks, confirmation checks, clarification requests.

Communication Strategies

One way that enables learners to continue their interaction is communication strategies (CSs). These strategies are used when communication breakdowns occur. Communication breakdowns cause a problem that interaction discontinues. A solution to overcome this problem is the use of CSs.

From the perspective of interaction, Tarone (1980) defines CSs as "a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared. (Meaning structures include both linguistic and sociolinguistic structures.)" (420). Her three criteria are as follows:

1. A speaker desires to communicate a meaning X to a listener.
2. The speaker believes the linguistic or sociolinguistic structure desired to communicate meaning X is not unavailable or is not shared with the listener.
3. The speaker chooses to:
   a. avoid- not attempt to communicate meaning X or
   b. attempt alternate means to communicate meaning X. The speaker stops trying alternatives when it seems clear to the speaker that there is shared meaning.

Key concepts when we consider Tarone's definition of CSs are that both a speaker and an interlocutor are eager to share the speaker's intended meaning and that they attempt to accomplish sharing of the meaning jointly.

Strategic Competence

A competence which relates to CSs is strategic competence. Strategic competence is one component of communicative language ability. Bachman and Palmer (1996) describe communicative language ability in a framework of test design. According to them, communicative language ability consists of two parts: language knowledge and strategic competence. They define strategic competence as "a set of metacognitive components, or strategies, which can be thought of as higher order executive processes that provide a cognitive

management function in language use, as well as in other cognitive activities" (Bachman and Palmer, 1996, p. 70). They indicate three areas in which metacognitive components operate: goal setting, assessment, and planning.

These three areas of metacognitive strategy use include CSs, the planning phase, defined by Faerch and Kasper (1983). From this point, CSs are triggered by strategic competence which is one component of communicative language ability.

Debate Activity

The previous section discussed the role of interaction in SLA and two factors which seem to contribute to promoting learners' interaction: negotiation of meaning and the use of CSs. Then, we have to discuss a way which enables utilizing the use of CSs and intervention to promote learners' interaction.

In a classroom setting, it is beneficial to set up activities which require learners to interact with others. A number of these activities have been designed and introduced in language classroom, e.g., games, role play, and project works (Koyanagi, 2004). Among these activities, this study selects debate as an activity which requires interaction among learners. In this paper, we call debate a "debate activity" to distinguish it from debate which is recognized generally. This study pays attention to characteristics of debate as an activity which promote learners' interaction rather than a game which puts an emphasis on victory or defeat.

Many researchers study on tasks which are activities designed to promote learners' SLA. Nunan defines a task as follows:

> "a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning rather than to manipulate form" (Nunan, 2004, p. 4)

Ellis (2003) considers the effect of task features on interaction from perspectives of six task features: (1) required vs. optional information exchange, (2) types of required information exchange, (3) expected task outcome, (4) a topic, (5) discourse domain, and (6) cognitive complexity.

The first feature which should be considered is whether information exchange is required or optional. Required information exchange refers to the one that "learners cannot complete the task unless they exchange the information" (Ellis, 2003, p. 86). Ellis categorizes information gap tasks as tasks which require information exchange, and opinion exchange tasks as tasks

where information exchange is optional. According to him, information gap tasks provide learners with more opportunities of negotiation work than opinion gap tasks. Debate is categorized into opinion gap tasks that have less effect on interaction than information gap task. However, this study suggests that debate has a characteristic which requires learners to exchange information. In debate activities, learners are divided into two positions: an affirmative position or a negative position to a given topic. And they are supposed to convince others of their opinions by rebutting the other side's opinions. To rebut the other sides' opinions, learners have to exchange their opinion, that is, information. From this point of view, it is interpreted that debate has the characteristic of required information exchange task which promote learners' interaction.

The next dimension which receives attention is whether a task is categorized as a one-way task or two-way task. In a one-way task, a single person holds information which is to be shared to complete the task, while in a two-way task information is held between two or more people. Many studies claim that a two-way task produces more negotiation work than a one-way task. This study categorizes debate as a two-way task because in the task both learners from an affirmative side and learners from a negative side hold different information.

The third point to be considered is a distinction of task outcome: open tasks or closed tasks. Open tasks are tasks where there is no predetermined solutions. Opinion gap tasks, such as making choices, surveys, debate, or discussion are open tasks. On the other hand, closed tasks have a single, correct solution that learners need to reach to complete the task. Information gap tasks are closed tasks in nature. Ellis suggests that closed tasks result in more negotiation than open tasks and closed tasks are more likely to promote acquisition. However, he also points out that "it is worth bearing in mind that closed tasks may be less beneficial if other aspects of discourse that may be important for acquisition, for example, the opportunity to produce long turns, are considered" (Ellis, 2003, p. 91).

The fourth feature of tasks is a topic. Topics of tasks also impact on learners' interaction. Studies on topics of tasks indicate that topic familiarity and topic importance influence on learners' interaction resulting from the task. According to these studies, it is suggested that the more familiar and important a topic is to learners, the more interaction occurs. Topics differ with regard to the kind of information that needed to be exchanged: human-ethical and objective-spatial. A human-ethical topic promotes interaction among learners. To set up a topic of the task by considering both topic familiarity and topic importance is a crucial point for all tasks. Therefore, if a topic of debate is familiar and important to learners, learners'

interaction in the task may be promoted. When teachers design a debate activity, they should set up a topic which is more familiar and more important to learners.

The fifth feature of tasks is a discourse mode. A discourse mode is likely to be an important dimension of tasks. Ellis mentions that "the discourse mode associated with a task will affect the extent to which participants modify their input and output in negotiation exchange" (Ellis, 2003, p. 93). Ellis reports two studies of effects of a discourse mode on interaction. One study suggests that a task that involves collaborative exchange such as a free discussion task results in more meaning negotiation than a task of which discourse more is expository. The other study suggests that a task where discourse mode is narrative elicits more meaning negotiation than the task of which discourse mode is object description. A discourse mode of a debate activity in the present study is categorized as narrative and collaborative modes. These discourse modes have a positive impact on interaction. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that debate has a positive influence on interaction.

This paper discusses cognitive complexity of tasks as the final point to be considered. Context-dependency is regarded as a major factor which determines cognitive complexity. Tasks which are context-free, i.e., without any information from a situation, promote more meaning negotiation than context-embedded tasks. This characteristic requires learners to interact with others by using a large amount of information to compensate for lack of information from context. Cognitively demanding tasks would be those that require learners to use language. Debate is categorized into tasks which are context-free because in the task learners are supposed to exchange opinions on a given topic without considering a situation where learners are. Since debate is a context-free task, it requires learners to express their opinions by using much linguistic information. From these points of view, this study suggests that debate is categorized as a cognitive demanding task which promotes interaction. However, Ellis states that "if a task is too challenging, it may cause learners to simply give up!" (Ellis, 2003, p. 95). Although many studies suggest that cognitively demanding tasks promote more meaning negotiation than cognitively undemanding tasks, an issue of what degree of cognitive complexity works best still remains unclear. This study suggests that the debate activity will be the task which promotes learners' interaction because it includes several dimensions which positively influences on interaction.

Next, this study discusses another characteristic which is worthy of remark from a perspective of intervention. In addition to the features of the debate activity that are likely to provoke negotiation of meaning among learners, the debate activity has another advantage.

The advantage is that the format of the activity provides teachers with a chance to intervene in learners' interaction. One characteristic of the debate activity which differs from the other opinion exchange tasks is that debate has a format in common. An example format of debate for pedagogical use in English language teaching is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

One basic format of debate (Based on Shiozawa, 2002)

Steps	Speech Sessions	Speakers
1	Constructive speech session	a. A speaker from an affirmative side
		b. A speaker from a negative side
2	Discussion	
3	Rebuttal speech session	c. A speaker from the affirmative side
		d. A speaker from the negative side
		e. A speaker from the affirmative side
		f. A speaker from the negative side
4	Summary speech session	g. A speaker from the negative side
		h. A speaker from the affirmative side

Debate proceeds by following this format. According to Table 1, it is obvious that each speaker is designated a part where they express their opinions. After each part, there is a space which enables a third person to intervene.

From this point of view, this study suggests that the format of the debate activity provides teachers with opportunities to give learners feedback and to assist learners in producing their utterance by intervening in their interaction.

Devices which Enhance the Positive Features of Debate Activity

This subsection discusses two ways that facilitate learners' interaction in the debate activity. When teachers design a lesson which involves the debate activity, they need to consider some devices to facilitate learners' interaction in the activity. This paper, considers especially two points: effectiveness of group size and the need of preparation for the debate activity.

First, this study explains effectiveness of interaction in a small group work from a perspective of the Interaction Hypothesis. Group work is often considered as an essential feature of communicative language teaching. According to Ellis (1994), group work increases

opportunities to use language, improves the quality of learner talk, promotes a positive affective climate, and motivates learners to learn. Furthermore, it provides much input and opportunities for output that are supposed to promote acquisition.

Ellis indicates that "interaction between learners can provide the interactional conditions which have been hypothesized to facilitate acquisition more readily than can interaction involving teachers" (Ellis, 1994, p. 599). Therefore, interaction in a small group is highly likely to be beneficial to learners because a small group offers them more opportunities to speak for negotiation of meaning. From the perspective of the Interaction Hypothesis, interaction in a small group work may help acquisition.

Then, this subsection will explain the other factor which helps to promote interaction: effectiveness of a pre-task phase. When teachers design a lesson which contains an activity, they need to consider stages or components of the lesson. Although many kinds of task designs have been proposed, these designs have three principal phases in common: a pre-task phase, a during-task phase, and a post-task phase.

Among these phases, a during-task phase refers to central and obligatory tasks when teachers design a lesson. In this study, the debate activity is a during-task phase. One the other hand, a pre-task phase and post-task phase are non-obligatory phases.

Although a pre-task phase and post-task phase are non-obligatory ones, these task phases serve a crucial role in ensuring that the task performance is maximally effective for language development (Ellis, 2003). Especially, it is highly possible that a pre-task phase influence learners' performance in the task.

This subsection discusses a pre-task phase by focusing on its effect on learners' interaction in the task. The purpose of this pre-task phase is "to prepare students to perform the task in ways that will promote acquisition" (Ellis, 2003, p. 244). When learners work on an activity, they have to pay attention to meaning, linguistic forms, and production at the same time. That causes high cognitive demands on learners and it may prevent interaction in the task. However, by setting up the pre-task phase, it is possible that teachers reduce the demand on learners which may prevent learners' interaction.

Ellis (2003) shows four ways that can be conducted in a pre-task phase to reach its purpose. These ways are (1) performing a similar task, (2) providing a model, (3) non-task preparation activities, and (4) strategic planning. The first way is designed to support learners in performing a task similar to the task they will perform in the during-task phase of the lesson. Another way is providing a model. This way asks learners to observe a model of how to

perform the task. The third way is engaging learners in non-preparation activities which are designed to prepare them to perform the task. To reduce cognitive or linguistic demands placed on learners is the focus of these activities. Brainstorming or mind maps are examples of these activities. The fourth way that Ellis shows is strategic planning. In this way, learners are given time to plan how they will perform the task. Strategic planning involves learners in considering the linguistic forms they will need to execute in the task.

From the perspective of the Interaction Hypothesis, the debate activity has characteristics which affect learners' interaction positively. In addition to the effect of characteristics itself, the teacher should combine some devices into a lesson which involves the activity to maximize positive features of the debate activity on interaction.

The Study

To examine the effects of the debate activity, this study designed two different styles of debate activity: students only debate activities (Sonly) and debate activities with more proficient users of a target language (S+mpu). Interactions among students in these debate activities were compared and analyzed by focusing on the use of CSs and intervention.

This study asked 32 first-year students of Akita University to participate in a debate activity that the author designed as an experiment for this study. They were divided into four debate groups: Debate groups 1, 2, 3, and 4. The English proficiency levels of these groups were regarded as equal based on the F-test.

Two more proficient users of English participated in Debate groups 3 and 4 and intervened in students' interaction. One was a post graduate student of Akita University who majors English education: the author of this study. The other was a professor of English education of Akita University.

Data were collected by means of three methods: transcription of dialogue of students in debate activities, student interview, and student questionnaire. The transcription of dialogue of students was arranged as a primary data analysis. The student interview and student questionnaire were conducted as secondary data.

Results and Discussion

This study had four major findings. First, this study found that students used seven kinds of CSs to continue their interaction in the debate activity: approximation, circumlocution, literal translation, language switch, appeal for assistance, mime, and message abandonment. Among

these CSs, approximation, circumlocution, and appeal for assistance seemed to encourage students to continue their interaction in English. Approximation and circumlocution were ways to convey students' intended meaning by using their interlanguage and appeal for assistance, especially in English, tended to prompt circumlocution. On the other hand, language translation and language switch prevent students' interaction in English. These two CSs depend on student's L1 knowledge and students tended to use these CSs in Japanese. These CSs deprive them of chances to elaborate their utterances in a second language.

The second point that this study found indicates that there was a relationship between the use of CSs and interaction. By comparing the interactions in Debate 1 and Debate 2 with the ones in Debate 3 and Debate 4, it is clear that the total speaking time of Debate 3 and Debate 4 were longer than that of Debate 1 and Debate2. In addition, the students in Debate 3 and Debate 4 used more words than the students in Debate 1 and Debate 2. On the other hand, as for speech rate, the average speech rate of Debate 1 and Debate 2 was higher than that of Debate 3 and Debate 4. It means that the students in Debate 1 and Debate 2 uttered more words per minute than the students in Debate 3 and Debate 4. This lower speech rate of Debate 3 and Debate 4 may result from the use of CSs. Since it required the students of unprepared interactions, it was difficult for them to express opinions in English instantly and fluently because of a high cognitive demand.

The third finding of this study was influence of more proficient users' intervention. This study set up two different styles of debate activities: Sonly and S+mpu. The comparison of interactions between these two styles of debate activities revealed several differences. In Sonly, students tended to ask for assistance in Japanese. While in S+mpu students tended to use much English words or expressions than students only debate activities. In Debate 4, which took place with a more proficient user, students did not use Japanese. As for characteristics of their interaction, more words were used in S+mpu than in Sonly. It must have resulted from the use of CSs which were encouraged by the more proficient user's intervention. Yet, as for speech rate, the average of S+mpu was lower than that of Sonly. This study may suggest that more proficient user's intervention caused this difference. Because of the intervention, more impromptu interactions among students occurred after each speech session in S+mpu. This unprepared interaction caused students cognitive demands that they had to think up an idea and make sentences to express their intended idea. This impromptu interaction led to a lower speech rate in S+mpu than that of Sonly, since the students took time to produce an utterance.

The final point that this study found was that there were differences in ways of solving a

communication breakdown. By comparing two types of debate activities, there were differences between them. In Sonly, the students tended to ask for clarification or repetition in Japanese to solve a communication breakdown. Interaction in Japanese could solve communication breakdowns easily than interaction in English, because intended meaning was conveyed more successfully in Japanese than in English. Another characteristic of Sonly was abandonment of solving a communication breakdown. These characteristics caused the students to lose opportunities to interact in English. On the other hand, in S+mpu, the students and more proficient users tried to solve communication breakdowns by adopting different ways from the way Sonly used. First, a more proficient user's intervention gave a chance of solving a communication breakdown to students by intervening in students' interaction. Second, the more proficient user's intervention was able to detect difficulties held by the students. The third, characteristic of the intervention was a function which reduces students' anxiety. However, although more proficient users' intervention seemed to give influence on solving a communication breakdown, not all communication breakdowns were solved even though a more proficient user joined the debate activity.

Conclusion

This study examines the effects of debate as a communicative activity on students' interaction by focusing on negotiation of meaning and the use of CSs. This study found that some CSs encouraged students to continue their interaction in English in the debate activities. Furthermore, the results of this study showed that more proficient users' intervention affected students' interaction in the debate activities.

In conclusion, this study indicates that the potential of a debate activity as a communicative activity which promotes students' interaction by adopting pedagogical supports such as instruction in CSs and intervention. Although this study investigated only four debate activities, this study implies that the results from the present experiment could give some suggestions to English teachers who are willing to make students interact with others communicatively in English classes.

To better understand the effects of debate activities, it is needed to observe debate activities in actual English classes constantly in future research. A continuous examination of the effects of the debate activity would strengthen the proposition that debate activities have potentials for promoting students' interaction in English classrooms.

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