Different Approaches to Encouraging Students to Ask Follow-up Questions

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ABSTRACT

In this study, three different approaches to encouraging students to increase the number of follow-up questions they ask in group discussions are compared. The results suggest that telling students to ask at least three questions and the use of a two-minute long follow-up question activity may have positive effects. However, another approach where students are asked to take one token each time they ask a follow-up question did not result in an increase in the number of follow-up questions asked. Moreover, the results show that no activities have positive delayed effects. A few possible explanations for the discouraging results such as the level of topic familiarity and the number of functions required to use in a discussion test are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, a growing body of researchers have investigated issues related L2 oral proficiency in pair and group interactions. Most of such studies have focused on the issues of integrating pair and/or group oral performance in an oral proficiency tests (Galaczi, 2008; Gan, 2008, 2010; Nakatsuhara, 2007). Another major focus related to pair and group interaction has been on learner variables, such as learners' characteristics, which influence their performance in oral proficiency tests (Nakatsuhara, 2011). A number of researchers have also investigated the influence of interlocutors' characteristics including proficiency in the L2 on oral performance in pair and group interactions (Lazaraton & Davis, 2008).

The criteria commonly used to assess learners' oral proficiency are, however, slightly different from those to assess the effectiveness of discussions probably because discussions require increasing interaction among participants. In general, listeners' skills are considered as confounding factors in oral proficiency tests because the speakers' performance varies depending on the interlocutors' proficiency levels, personalities, and cultural characteristics (Lazaraton, 2006; Nakatsuhara, 2011).

However, in effective discussions, the listeners' performance plays an important role and should not be neglected in teaching discussions. In fact, the detailed corpus-based investigation of group discussion component of the College English Test-Spoken English Test (CET-SET) by He and Dai (2006) introduced a code scheme which includes listeners' performance such as agreeing, disagreeing, asking for opinions, and challenging (p. 378). In an effective group discussion, listeners' skills to respond to, namely interact with, previous speakers are necessary, and these skills are sometimes challenging for learners because they require them to (1) comprehend the intended meaning of the previous speaker's utterance, (2) relate the utterance to what the listener knows and thinks, (3) make a decision on what skill to use to react to the utterance, and (4) be able to use that skill.

Among these listeners' skills in pair and group discussions, asking follow-up questions seems to be one of the most challenging tasks. In order to ask a follow-up question, the listener must perform the whole procedure described above just as other listeners' skills require, but asking a question per se is often more complicated and causes a greater difficulty than making a statement. In addition, such a question must be related to the previous speaker's idea and ask the

speaker to elaborate on his/her idea. Therefore, the skill to ask a follow-up question requires increasing attention and practice.

Several possible approaches can be used to help students ask follow-up questions in English Discussion Class. Some of the approaches seem to be more effective in enhancing the quality of follow-up questions and/or in increasing the number of follow-up questions asked. The main purpose of this study is to compare how different approaches to encouraging students to ask follow-up questions may affect the total number of follow-up questions each student asks in group discussions.

METHOD

This study followed a quasi experimental design using intact freshman classes in a university in Tokyo. Three sets of statistical data were collected from students' discussion test 1, 2 and 3 (DT1, DT2, and DT3 respectively) scores during the fall semester of 2011. The first data set from DT1 was taken to ensure that all participating groups were comparable in terms of the number of follow-up questions they asked in their DT1. Based on the result of a one-way ANOVA, nine classes were chosen and divided into almost identical four groups in terms of the number of follow-up questions asked in DT1: Control Group (CG), Token Group (TG), Fluency Group (FG), and Goal Group (GG). The numbers of participants in each group are 15, 14, 18, and 14 respectively. A paired t-test was administered to compare the numbers of follow-up questions asked between DT1 and DT2 and between DT1 and DT3 to observe immediate and delayed effects respectively. Finally, a one-way ANOVA was run to see the differences among groups in DT2 and DT3.

Before different treatments were implemented, all groups received a common treatment. First the definition of a follow-up question was given: "a question which a listener asks to help the speaker to talk about his/her opinion or idea more in detail." In order to check that students understood the above definition, they used a handout (see Appendix A) where they chose follow-up questions from a list which included follow-up as well as other types of questions.

In addition to the common treatment, three different approaches to encouraging students to ask follow-up questions were used for three different experimental groups during lessons in Week 6, 7, and 8: TG, FG, and GG. Those in TG were instructed to take a token from a pile of tokens placed in the middle of the table each time they asked a follow-up question in their group discussion. At the end of group discussion 1, they counted how many tokens they had collected during the discussion. The students in FG received a timed-practice for follow-up questions. In this activity, the students were paired up, one student was assigned as speaker and the other as listener. The listeners were given one common question to ask their partner and were told to ask as many follow-up questions as possible in two minutes. They were also told to count how many follow-up questions they asked during this activity. They changed partners and repeated the same task twice. All participants in FG practiced three sets of a two minute fluency-based follow-up question activity in Week 6, 7, and 8. Finally the students in GG were simply told to ask at least three follow-up questions during their group discussions immediately before they started group discussions 1 and 2. At the end of each group discussion, they were asked whether they had been able to ask three or more follow-up questions. They also received this treatment in Week 6, 7, and 8.

RESULTS

The results from a paired t-test are summarized in Table 1. No significant improvements in terms of the differences in the number of follow-up questions asked in DT1, DT2, and DT3 are

found in any of the groups. However, immediate effects in TG, FG and GG as well a delayed effect in TG show medium effect sizes (r =.32, .37, .41, and .45 respectively). Therefore, taking tokens during discussion practice, the timed follow-up questions practice and setting a goal seem to have positive immediate effects to some extent, and taking tokens during discussion practice show negative delayed effect, although none of these effects are significant.

	Group	Mean	SD	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	t	df	p	r
CG	Immediate	-.467	1.922	-1.531	.598	-.940	14	.363	.24
	Delayed	.067	1.624	-.833	.966	.159	14	.876	.04
TG	Immediate	.643	1.985	-.503	1.789	1.212	13	.247	.32
	Delayed	1.000	2.075	-.198	2.198	1.803	13	.095	.45
FG	Immediate	-.889	2.298	-1.828	.256	-1.641	17	.119	.37
	Delayed	.500	1.917	-.819	.962	1.106	17	.284	.26
GG	Immediate	-.786	1.805	-2.032	.254	-1.629	13	.127	.41
	Delayed	.071	1.542	-.454	1.454	.173	13	.865	.05

Table 1. *Differences in the number of follow-up questions between DT1 and DT2 and between DT1 and DT3*

With respect to the difference among groups in DT2 and DT3, the ANOVA results show that there are no significant differences among groups. As illustrated in Table 2, although the differences among groups in terms of the number of follow-up questions asked in DT2 are not significant, the differences are still meaningful with a medium effect size, $F(3, 57) = 2.579$, $p = .062$, $\eta^2 = .12$. On the other hand, the differences among groups in the number of follow-up questions asked in DT3 are not significant and have small effect size, $F(3, 57) = 1.092$, $p = .36$, $\eta^2 = .06$. The difference between the effect sizes found in DT2 and DT3 results indicate that differences among groups in DT2 are slightly greater than those found in DT3.

	SS	df	MS	F	p	η^2
Between Groups	20.627	3	6.876	2.579	.062	.12
Within Groups	151.963	57	2.666			
Total	172.590	60				

Table 2*Differences among groups in DT2*

	SS	df	MS	F	p	η^2
Between Groups	6.275	3	2.092	1.092	.360	.06
Within Groups	109.135	57	1.915			
Total	15.410	60				

Table 3.*Differences among groups in DT3*

DISCUSSION

Although the results in this study seem to be discouraging, two possible explanations for the decrease in the number of follow-up questions can be considered. One explanation is topic familiarity. In a casual discussion after DT3, a majority of students reported that the topic used for DT3, which was gender, was one of the most difficult topics to discuss because they did not know much about issues pertaining to gender. The increasing topic difficulty caused by unfamiliarity with the topic might have demanded the students to focus on content rather than discussion skills.

The other possible explanation is the increasing number of target functions. In DT3, the students were told to use six different functions. In other words, their attention was preoccupied with using functions rather than asking follow-up questions. The small effect size in DT3 and decrease in the number of follow-up questions from DT1 to DT3 and from DT2 and DT3 seem to indicate that asking follow-up questions in DT3 is more difficult than the other two tests. As Segalowitz (2000) suggests, the learners' "cognitive fluency" (p. 202) in asking follow-up questions has not developed yet since it seems that the skill to ask follow-up questions has not been automatized yet. If it were, the participants would be able to use it regardless of other factors, such as topic familiarity; therefore, it seems that the participants might still rely on attention-based process when asking follow-up questions.

Another possibility for the non-significant improvement might be attributed to the research design itself. First, the relatively small number of participants in each group might explain the reason why the findings show no significant differences. Two of the groups in this study have only 14 participants, and the sample size is slightly smaller than what Fraenkel and Wallen (2003) suggest as a minimum number of samples for experimental research, which is 15 to 30. The suggested size is merely a minimum size; therefore, the larger the sample size is, the more generalizable the results should be. The results from larger sample sizes might be different from those in this study.

CONCLUSION

Although the results in this study do not show any significant effects in the number of follow-up questions asked, the findings in this study do not suggest that the number of follow-up questions cannot be improved by instructions. It should also be noted that the participants in this study received the treatment for only three weeks, namely three times. A study investigating the effect of longer treatments should be encouraged since the three short practice sessions in this study show some positive effects in the posttest results. More importantly, short practice sessions in this study are practical because it can be integrated in any lesson easily when students have problems with asking follow-up questions. Goal setting and timed practice might help them.

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APPENDIX
Follow-up Questions

Q. Which questions are follow-up questions?

Shun: I think McDonald's is better than MOS Burger. McDonald's fries are delicious, and more importantly McDonald's food is cheaper than that of MOS Burger.

(1) Do you often go to McDonald's?

(5) Do you work at McDonald's?

(2) Why do you think so?

(6) What often do you go there?

(3) How about Freshness Burger?

(7) Have you eaten Teriyaki Burger?

(4) What do you eat there?

(8) If MOS's food were cheaper, would

you go to MOS Burger?