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INFORMATION GAP TASKS: MOTIVATING AND ENCOURAGING TALK IN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the use of information gap tasks in an English language classroom promoted the use of wh-questions among learners and increased interaction among learners. Literature shows that there is a tendency for language teachers to control the patterns of classroom communication as well as control talk in the classroom, thus limiting interaction and talk among learners. In second language acquisition, learners need to interact in the target language as studies show that learners need to *learn to talk* and also *talk to learn* (Tsui, 1995; 2017). Questioning is an important pathway for learners to learn as well as create a talk to acquire language. This paper examines the use of information gap tasks to encourage and promote interaction via wh-questions among learners in a primary vernacular public school in Malaysia. The study adopts a mixed method approach to data

collection where pre-and post-tests were used to analyze the effects of information-gap tasks on wh-questions use. Interaction analysis was also done to examine how learners from different levels of proficiency interacted during the information-gap tasks. The findings of this study revealed that the use of information-gap tasks improved the learners' use of interrogative pronouns in terms of constructing questions to obtain their desired answers as well as encouraging interactions. Information-gap tasks are suitable tasks and tools to be used in the language classroom to encourage talk and interaction amongst learners to aid language development.

Keywords: Information-gap task, Wh-question, English language learning, interaction, classroom-based research, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

Talking and interacting in language classrooms is necessary for second language learners to acquire the target language. Teacher-fronted interactions, as well as learner-learner interactions, are an essential part of learning a language in a classroom setting. However, researchers have pointed out that most language classrooms are teacher-fronted classrooms where teachers control patterns of interactions as well as taking up most of the interaction time (Tsui, 1995; 2017; Xu et. al, 2017). Researchers have been advocating that the development of language learners' communicative ability and linguistic competence should be emphasized in the language classroom and learners should be encouraged to interact as much as possible (Asrobi, Seken & Suarnajaya, 2013). Bentley (2007) asserted that school provides the opportunity for the learners to engage in everyday conversational talk and academic talk. Interaction among learners is important as this allows learners to practice specialized content vocabulary as well as acquire conversational strategies and techniques. In a language classroom, classroom talk should be balanced among lower-order talk and higher-order talk as well as between teacher-fronted and learner-learner interaction. Recalling previous knowledge, checking to understand, and revising learning refer to lower-order talk while stimulating discussion, developing cognitive skills, and expressing opinion refer to higher-order talk (Fischer, 2005).

Higher-order thinking should be encouraged in language classrooms as it encourages interaction as well as develops learners' cognitive skills. In the Malaysian context, a shift towards achieving higher

order talk is more prominent with the implementation of the Standard-based Curriculum for Primary Schools in 2011 and the subsequent introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in 2016 (Hazita, 2016). The use of wh-questions is one noticeable way to encourage learners to think as wh-questions stimulate ideas and also promote interaction (Brown, 2007). Wh-questions provide opportunities for the learners to think and encourage them to express their ideas especially when speaking. Cenderato (2010) researched the effect of guiding wh-question in teaching the second language (L2) speaking and the outcome showed that the learners performed better through the use of wh-questions.

Two-way communication refers to interactions between teacher and learners, learners and learners should be encouraged to promote learning English. However, certain learners have authority-oriented learning strategies where they prefer teachers to explain everything, and these students become passive in the language classroom and thus limit their language acquisition experiences (Wong & Nunan, 2011). This is supported by Liu & Zhu (2012) who stated that the excessive use of teacher talk is not an ideal approach, as the learners should be allowed to speak and interact more in English. Some learners still prefer to use their mother tongue or first language (L1) to convey messages or complete tasks as this is the alternative way of gaining the response needed (Zhang, 2016). Raptou (2002) suggested that the use of activities-based information-gap tasks can provide more opportunities for learners to interact in English classrooms as well as promote higher-order thinking questions. Information-gap tasks also enhance peer interaction among learners themselves without the teacher playing a part in the interaction, thus providing learners maximum interaction chances and thus providing a more effective language acquisition context (Kayi, 2006). Thus, this study examines how the use of information gap tasks can provide learners the opportunity to develop their wh-question skills and enhance their interactions in an English language classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Information-gap Tasks

Information-gap tasks refer to the task or activity of discovering missing features or information among two nearly identical pictures,

each set of pictures will have some information deleted or missing, creating a gap (Littlewood, 2011). Information-gap activity refers to the activity in which the sharing of information among learners is involved to make a decision, solve a problem or gather information (Neu & Reeser, 1997). Referring to Ismaili and Bajrami (2016), the information gap is an activity that requires the participation of the learners to use language to exchange some information and get their meaning across. The task does not emphasize grammatical form but concentrates on meaning. Therefore, learners learn by engaging actively in the activity of information sharing to solve the problem of missing information.

Learners learn through engaging actively in the information-gap activity of information sharing to solve the problem of missing information. This is based on the principle that people engaged in real communication need to acquire the information they do not possess based on the information gap principle (Richard, 2006). Information-gap activity refers to a 'gap' between two speakers, whereby they do not have the same information and can only complete the whole picture by sharing that information (Harmer, 2007). Ismaili and Bajrami (2016) stated that the target language needs to be used in the information-gap activity to share the information that the other learner lacks.

Referring to the types of information-gap activity as proposed by Littlewood (2011), discovering missing information of features is chosen in this research. In this study, the information represented in picture form is given to learner A. Some items of information have been deleted from the picture. However, learner B has an identical picture with the deletion of different items of information. Each learner can complete the picture by asking the particular partner for the information that he/she lacks. To start this activity, learner A uses the targeted interrogative pronoun to inquire about the information needed for the first picture. Then, learner B responds by uttering the needed information by referring to his/her picture while learner A jots down the answer. For the second turn, another picture is given as learner A needs to figure out another interrogative pronoun to obtain his/her desired answer. The first cycle is done after the completion of five rounds of the information-gap activities. In the second cycle,

learners switch roles, and learner A takes the role of answering the questions posted by learner B.

The Effectiveness of Information-Gap Tasks in promoting L2 Speaking and Interaction

Several types of research have shown that information gap tasks are effective in improving the rate and volume of L2 speaking. Information-gap tasks encourage active interaction among learners. For example, a study by Herdawan (2015) showed that the mean score achieved by learners who were exposed to the information-gap task is higher than for those who were taught using the Audio Lingual approach. This is also in line with Hess (2001) who asserted that the information-gap task provides a positive atmosphere that gives the opportunities to engage with one another or ask for help from others, thus promoting interaction and collegiality among learners. Nguyen et al. (2020) also found in their study that the use of information-gap activities encouraged equal group participation between participants and encouraged active participation of students.

Information-gap tasks also improve and encouraged interaction among learners. For instance, a study by Defrioka (2009) showed that students' interaction in speaking classes improved through the implementation of information-gap activities. Ismaili and Bajrami (2016) researched learners' perceptions of the use of information-gap activity in classrooms. The results showed that the majority of the learners were happy to experience 'natural' learning where they could apply and use the grammar and vocabulary they know. The leaders claimed that they had more chances to practice English to improve their English vocabulary which made them feel that they are learning new things. In addition, Sartika (2016) also conducted research to analyze if there would be a significant difference in achievement between the learners who were exposed to practice speaking through information-gap tasks and conventional methods. Sartika's research showed that students in the information-gap tasks performed significantly better than those using the conventional method. Ratnasari and Widyahening (2017) also conducted experimental research which showed the finding of a higher mean score in applying information-gap activity to teach speaking skills than using conventional techniques. Thus, it can be seen that information-gap tasks are effective in helping to improve L2 speaking.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed method approach to research design, whereby the quantitative data (pre-test) was conducted before obtaining the qualitative data (interactions) through information-gap tasks. This was then followed by quantitative data (post-test) that was obtained to determine the effectiveness of information-gap tasks towards the use of wh-questions.

For this study, purposive sampling was used where one class of 24 primary pupils were involved as the participants. These learners were ten years old and possessed a mixed level of speaking proficiency in terms of the use of L2 speaking, ranging from low to high proficiency.

The pre-and post-tests used the same questions that required learners to complete ten fill-in-the-blank tests. The pre-test was administered before the information gap tasks were carried out to gauge the level of learners' understanding of interrogative pronouns. The post-test was administered after the treatment which consisted of information gap tasks to encourage wh-questions. Two cycles of treatment were given whereby learners interacted in pairs engaged in the information gap tasks that required finding out information about the pictures they were given using wh-questions. Both learners will exchange roles to complete the information gap activities. The information gap activities used are based on Littlewood (2011) where learners need to discover missing information from pictures they have been given. The activity was repeated twice, and the activity was repeated the next day with a new set of information gap activities with different pictures.

The interactions between learners during the information gap activity were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The verbatim responses are transcribed using the transcription conventions by Walsh (2002) to provide a clearer picture of the interactions. The interactions were analyzed to examine the occurrences of wh-questions and how these encouraging interactions between the learners of varying levels of proficiency. The pre-and post-tests were also analyzed to examine the rate of improvement after the use of the information-gap activities.

FINDINGS

The main objective of this study was to examine the use of information gap tasks to encourage and promote interaction via the use of questions among learners in a primary vernacular public school in Malaysia. The findings will be discussed in two sections, the first section looks at the results from the pre-and post-tests and the second section looks at interaction excerpts of the learners interacting while doing the information-gap task.

Findings: Pre- and Post-Tests

The descriptive statistics for the pre-and post-tests for the study are shown below in Table 1.

Table 1

Pre- and Post-Test Results

	N	Mean	Median	Mode	Std.Deviation
Pre-Test	24	7.21	7.5	10	2.51
Post-Test	24	8.88	9	10	1.57

Although the learners' scored rather high for the pre-test, they scored even higher in the post-test. Thus the use of information-gap tasks did help them improve their wh-question usage and understanding.

Findings: Interaction Analysis

Six learners were selected based on their scores in the pre-test to record their verbatim responses when the information-gap activities were carried out. The learners who scored 10 out of 10 correctly were regarded as high achievers, 6 out of 10 correctly were distinguished as an intermediate level and 3 out of 10 correctly were identified as low achievers. Audio recorders were placed with the learners during their interactions. Their verbatim responses were recorded throughout the two cycles of information-gap activities. The interactions by these learners were analyzed based on themes identified from the literature. From the interactions, three themes were identified during information-gap tasks, i.e. high-interest shown by learners, scaffolding, and looking for solutions.

For the theme of high interest by learners, an excerpt is discussed in Table 2. This interaction involved the pair of high achievers, where both learners used English throughout without reverting to their L1, even before the information-gap activity started. Learner E showed curiosity to engage in the activity by uttering an interrogative pronoun (what) using an expressive voice. Then, learner E also portrayed the correct usage of ‘who’ to inquire who would become player one. Learner E was quite eager to start the activity by using the interrogative pronoun (when) to inquire about the status of the implementation of the information-gap activity. Learner F also showed keen interest in the task. This type of highly enthusiastic interaction and high interest showed by the learners is also shown in the study by Ismaili and Bajrami (2016), where they found that majority of their participants were happy to experience the ‘natural’ learning to apply grammar and vocabulary they know. The information-gap activity allows learners to engage in the task and offer a high cognitive engagement and learners forget their apprehension of not being accurate in the language. The length of interaction between the learners also increased during the information-gap tasks as the use of the wh-questions creates an atmosphere of asking and giving information. Liu and Zhu (2012) state that the use of wh-questions enables and encourages learners to talk and interact with each other actively, without intervention from the teacher. The information-gap tasks allow learners to talk and interact to solve the task, and thus increase their chances of acquiring the L2 as they actively use it.

Table 2

High Achiever Learners: Theme High Interest

Learner E	Learner F
Wow, what’s this thing?	
Shh...Listen to the teacher first	/I want to play/I want to play/ (inaudible)
Okay/okay/okay. Who wants to be player one?	

The second theme that was found was scaffolding and searching for solutions. The excerpt in Table 3 involves low achievers who were able to correctly use the targeted interrogative pronouns during

the information-gap activity. As a result, learner A, who was a low language achiever managed to ask 4 out of 5 questions correctly by using the targeted interrogative pronouns. The only incorrect answer came from the misinterpretation of the interrogative pronoun (what) and interrogative pronoun (when). However, learner B corrected the mistake immediately when the wrong response was heard. This situation is similar to the findings by Ohta (2001) who claimed that peer interaction during information-gap tasks provides opportunities for the learners to scaffold and search for solutions to language-related problems. However, as these learners were low achievers in the English language, they used their L1 (Mandarin) to scaffold their interactions and managed to complete the task. These two learners interacted actively and helped each other to complete the task. The information-gap activity helped them focus on using wh-questions to request correct information for them to complete the task.

Table 3

Low Achiever Learners: Scaffolding and Searching for Solutions

Learner A	Learner B
Who this is man?	Who.../Hmm/Hmm/Hmm/.Wait. HeadMAster.
/When/When/When	Wrong. 是 What. (<i>Refers to what</i>)
Aiyo. What animal 来的? (<i>What animal is this</i>)	It is a bird.
Where are you go arrgh?	(inaudible) 图书馆 (<i>library</i>)
When bus come?	Bus come 4p.m.
What thing inside?	Spider

DISCUSSION

From the analysis of the pre-test and post-test, it is found that the pupils possessed higher post-test scores as compared to the pre-test

scores. The use of information-gap activity played a significant part in increasing the use of the wh-questions of the learners. Ratnasari and Widyahening (2017) conducted an experimental research that showed the finding of a higher mean score in applying information-gap activity to teach speaking skills than using conventional techniques. Information-gap activities can be used by teachers to accommodate the pupils' preferences for learning styles and strategies can bring about improved learner satisfaction and attainment (Sieberer-Nagler, 2015).

The interaction analysis also showed encouraging findings in that the information-gap tasks provided learners opportunities to interact in English actively and they were able to use wh-questions with ease to complete the tasks. Even learners with lower level proficiency were able to interact and use the wh-questions. Learners were also highly enthusiastic and enjoyed the activities. This is also observed in Ismaili and Bajrami's (2016)'s study where they observed that participants were very happy to experience the 'natural' interactive atmosphere created during information-gap tasks and were able to apply the grammar and vocabulary they have learned. The role of the teacher as the controller of information and talk in class also diminishes as suggested by Nazadiandost et al. (2019) as learners have control of the task and do not rely on the teacher. Thus learners are actively using language to obtain the information they are missing as found in this study where learners manage to complete tasks on their own without asking for help from the teacher.

The information-gap activities also enabled learners to help each other communicate during the sessions. It was observed that the learners could interact with higher-length utterances and even help each other solve miscommunications. The learners were able to use wh-questions to seek information to aid their comprehension, and hence scaffold their interactions. Peer interaction and correction supported by wh-questions encourage the production of language and encourage language acquisition. This can be seen as a form of collaborative dialogue where learners or speakers are actively engaged in solving problems and building knowledge (Swain, 2000). Swain and Watanabe (2013) discuss collaborative dialogue as a cognitive tool for speakers and writers to mediate and scaffold their thinking and that of their interlocutors; these speakers co-construct

meaning and negotiate meaning and this is a source of language learning and development. Talk and interaction, especially among learners themselves are essential in ensuring that learners actively use language and thus make meaning on their own. Information-gap tasks and activities as shown in this study can be a source of encouraging and motivating learners to interact on their own, without the teacher controlling the interaction. Learners also were highly engaged in the tasks, and these tasks even allowed lower-level proficiency learners to interact with each other.

LIMITATIONS

One of the limitations of this study is the research is limited to the participants of only one group of students in a vernacular school. Thus the results of the study should not be generalized to other contexts. However, the patterns of findings seem to be similar to other researchers in the area of study. This is a small-scale study that shows that learners can be engaged in creating talk on their own if the task is designed appropriately.

RECOMMENDATION

This study is constructed based on learners' perspectives as it involves the application of information-gap activity to improve their usage of interrogative pronouns. Future research should be conducted to include also the role of the teachers in such activities as well as how they may prepare for the tasks. Examining the development of the information-gap tasks and the execution by teachers during class time will also allow us to understand the dynamics of the language classroom better.

Information-gap activities can be manipulated in many ways to encourage L2 speaking among learners. These activities can also be used to develop other skills as well, such as listening. Even vocabulary development can be enhanced using information-gap tasks. Teachers and educators can design their tasks to suit their lesson outcomes and according to the level of their students. Focusing on learner talk is also one avenue to enhance our understanding of language development

and move away from focusing on the teacher and teaching. Learners gain autonomy during interactions and they collaborate to develop their language skills.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study revealed that the use of information-gap tasks improved the learners' use of interrogative pronouns in terms of constructing questions to obtain their desired answers as well as encouraging interactions. The use of information-gap tasks with pictures also encouraged learners to interact actively; even those with limited proficiency were able to complete their tasks. Information-gap tasks should be used in language classrooms to encourage student interaction as interaction is essential for language acquisition and development.

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