

# Using input-based tasks with young learners in Japan

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## Abstract

This study examined learners' voluntary production in a set of input-based tasks. The participants were young Japanese learners of English, who were complete beginners. The materials employed listen-and-do tasks (i.e. one-way information gap tasks mediated by the teacher's simple oral commands). This type of task was chosen because complete beginners could not be expected to produce freely in the L2. The data showed that the learners used the L2 even though production was not required. They frequently repeated parts of the teacher's utterances, sometimes in the form of "language play" and sometimes in order to negotiate the meaning of the teacher's utterances in order to complete the task. Negotiation increased in both frequency and range as the learners became increasingly familiar with the tasks.

## Keywords

task-based language teaching; teaching young learners; role of the teacher

## 1 Introduction

Input-based tasks need to meet Ellis' (2003) four defining criteria for a "task": (1) meaning is primary, (2) there is some type of gap (e.g. an information gap), (3) learners are required to use their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources to communicate, and (4) there is some outcome other than simply the display of correct language. In the case of (3), learners have to use their own linguistic resources in conjunction with contextual information to process the input they are exposed to in an input-based task. "Process" here refers both to comprehending the meaning of the input and, potentially, to attending to linguistic form (i.e. noticing) where this is required in order to comprehend.

As Ellis, noted, an input-based task often takes the form of a listen-and-do task – a one-way information gap task that requires learners to listen to commands or descriptions and then perform actions to show they have understood the commands. Ellis noted that "simple listening tasks

can be devised that can be performed with zero competence in the L2" (p. 37). The Input-based tasks, however did not prohibit production; they merely did not require it. As previous research has shown, learners often produce the L2 when repeating some part of the teacher's utterances (e.g., Ota, 2001). Also Ellis & Heimbach, 1997 reported that under some circumstances young children engaged in the negotiation of meaning in their L1 when they do not understand. However, there has been very little research that has examined young, beginner learners' L2 production in listen-and-do tasks.

The research question addressed for this study is: In what ways did the young beginner learners voluntarily use language in the input-based tasks?

## 2 Methods

### 2.1 Participants

Fifteen children with no prior knowledge of English and no prior experience of instruction in English participated in this study. They were divided into two classes and received the input-based instruction described below.

### 2.2 Tasks

Three tasks designed to introduce 24 nouns were conducted nine times over five weeks. Each task involved the participants listening to the teacher's commands and responding to them. At the beginning of each lesson, the goal and task procedures were explained to the participants using the learners' L1 if necessary. I did not include a "pre-task" phase in the sense used in some studies (e.g. de la Fuente, 2002) where it has served to pre-teach the vocabulary items used in the tasks. In other words, the learners were initially required to perform the listen-and-do task with no prior knowledge of the target words. To assist them in comprehending the words, I provided both verbal and non-verbal (e.g. the use of gesture) support.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

All the classrooms were audio- and video-recorded and transcribed to analyze the verbal and non-verbal utterances by the teacher and the

students.

### 3 Findings

In order to obtain a general picture of the functions of the students' L2 production I coded the students' L2 utterances as "repetition", "negotiation" and "language play" in the data obtained from Lessons 1, 5 and 9 (Table 1). The table shows that while the students' repetition occurred frequently and remained constant throughout, negotiation of meaning was at first non-existent and then gradually increased. There were also a few occasions when the students started to use the L2 in playful manner as they repeatedly experienced the same tasks.

Table 1: Repetition, Negotiation and Language Play in Students' L2 Use in Lesson 1, 5 and 9

	L1	L5	L9
Repetition	36	77	28
Negotiation	0	67	82
Language Play	0	3	2

A notable feature of the learners' production was their frequent imitation of the teacher's words. Sociocultural theorists see imitation as especially beneficial for children (Lantolf, 2003) and view it as a process of internalization. Lightbown and Spada (1993) suggest that "children's imitation is selective and based on what they are currently learning" (p. 3). It seems that voluntary imitation played an important role in the children's acquisition of the target words. It served as a means of "rehearsing" what they had "noticed". This may have been beneficial for as Robinson (2003) pointed out, "rehearsal" as well as "attention" to linguistic form is necessary for learning.

Another important feature was an increase in the negotiation of meaning. Although the students varied in the extent to which they engaged in "negotiation", most of the students (11 out of 15 students) did so quite extensively.

This finding differed from that reported in Ellis and Heimbach (1997), where only a few students negotiated in the teacher-class lesson even though they were encouraged to do so. The most likely explanation for this difference is the way in which the tasks were implemented in the two studies. In Ellis and Heimbach the task was performed just once. In this study, the tasks were repeated nine times. The frequency of negotiation of meaning increased considerably over time. Other studies have shown that task-repetition leads to greater participation in tasks by children (e.g., Pinter, 2005). Task familiarity makes meaning negotiation easier.

### 4 Discussion

The learners used the L2 even though production was not required. They frequently repeated the target words throughout the nine lessons, which helped them focus on the phonological forms of the words. The learners' freely negotiated the meaning of the teacher's commands and statements in order to complete the task. Negotiation increased in both frequency and range as the learners became increasingly familiar with the tasks. The learners also occasionally engaged in "language play". In these ways, the children's voluntary production in the L2 may have facilitated learning.

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