

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter concludes the study on the interactional functions and the overall amount of talk of Thai undergraduates elicited by an information-gap task. A summary of results of the data analysis presented in the last chapter is followed by discussion of these findings, and how to implement an information-gap task to classroom teaching and learning.

This study has three major interests. The first interest was to examine how information-gap tasks affect interactional discourse and length of utterance. The second interest was to determine whether an information-gap task is an effective method to elicit increased student interaction. The overall aim is to find more conclusive evidence that information-gap tasks enhance a student's learning. These interests were stated as research questions in Chapter I. The findings are as follows:

- (1) There were differences in numbers and distributions of interactional functions generated in an Information Gap Task.
- (2) There were differences in numbers and distributions of the overall amount of talk generated in an Information Gap Task.
- (3) There were considerable variations between student pairs in the total amount of interactional functions generated in an Information Gap Task.
- (4) An information gap task is an effective method to give students opportunities for interaction and learning.

The present study supports the finding of the task-typology of Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993). In addition to the findings above and in the earlier chapter, further conclusions of the study are presented below.

As the result shows, in an information gap task there are certain advantages in terms of opportunities for comprehensible output and producing comprehensible output. The interaction patterns from the transcriptions in information tasks revealed that participants tried hard to achieve the task goal, which was to get to the right tourist attractions. The task also engaged the student-pairs in the semantic and syntactic levels of language, with one-word confirmation checks being made frequently. They sometimes produced a grammatical error, but they seemed willing to be involved in the conversation.

However, due to the task demand or the dominant goal of successful task completion, the interlocutor's attention in the information-gap task is primarily on the informational plane. Student pairs are forced to produce a task solution more than they are to produce language (Halliday and Hasan, 1989). Consequently, interactions are different from natural conversation. Information in the information-gap task is one-way, i.e., only one participant holds the information and the other must request it, resulting in a one-way flow of information. In a normal conversation we would not expect one party to control and change to new topics (McCarthy, 1991) as in the information-gap task. In everyday conversation each speaker normally contributes to the conversation.

Therefore, highly fixed in form and associated with particular context of the information-gap task are expressions such as, “am a tourist from Thailand,” and “am a tourist from Japan,” utterance by student-pairs in the opening line of the conversation. (e.g., see student-pair 1 to 4, Appendix 4). However, there was no explicit opening and following the exchange in the later part of the student-pair conversations, but was a mixture of explicit topics and natural conversation topics. This could mean that an information-gap task is sometimes a high control task, but if the task creator, teacher could maximize that particular task the learners could also gain benefit from it.

In addition, there is evidence of task-related variability which showed that the production of the Interactional functions were different from one pair to the other in an information-gap task. Differences that emerge within task-type can be linked to certain factors. Taking a closer look at the transcripts revealed that the first factor was unlike the other interactional functions examined in the study; confirmation-checks, backchannel-cues, echoes, clarification-checks and comprehension-checks were mostly dependent on an individual’s style. The task allows the learners to use their learning experience while doing the task. This helps the learners to have more confidence in showing their abilities since they have background knowledge about the content they are doing. Indeed, a higher number of those international discourse functions were initiated by speaker A in almost every student-pair on the information-gap task. Task demand is another factor which can be tied to task-related variability. In most cases, the information-gap task used in this study was easily identified by the student-pairs and talk turns were short in duration.

To sum up, an analysis of L2 exchanges reflects difference in the interlocutors' goals on different tasks as follows:

- (1) repetition is essential to L2 discourse,
- (2) repetition is a task variable
- (3) repetition has both a repair and non-repair function
- (4) repetition serves different functions across the task.

The findings indicate that the information Gap Task gave student pairs opportunities to interact and produce a lot of discourse functions, and these discourse functions are important to students' language acquisition.

In terms of the overall amount of talk, student-pairs had illustrated some essential differences in length of turns. The frequency of clarification elicited by an information-gap task showed a lot of exchange happened in order to complete the task. As had been observed, in the information-gap task excerpts and the transcriptions, the turn taking produced was quite frequent, and turns which last only a single line are often followed by a request for clarification or an acknowledgment of understanding or knowing (e.g. "Huh?", "Ok ok I see").

Indeed, if the discourse had been a long one, the listener would have had to take in information at a much faster rate than he or she could possibly have handled. Instead, the discourse produced by the student-pairs is usually broken down so that their partner has time to comprehend and act upon, what their partner had been saying. In addition, many of the turns taken within the high interactional functions task, like the information-gap task, involved more simple language in shorter phrases.

Moreover, the goals of the information-gap task generated results in interactions differing from naturally-occurring conversation. A salient feature of real-life conversation is that turn size and turn order are not fixed. According to Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), the turn-taking organization of natural conversation “makes no provision for the content of any turn, nor does it constrain what is done in any turn” (p.710). The turn-taking pattern of an information-gap task is very unlike in natural conversation. As can be seen in the transcription in Appendix 4 the student-pairs produced the same opening and closing, or the turn taking which followed the sequencing of A to B and B to A, until that conversation is completed. However, in natural conversation, participants would signal to one another that they were finished with their turn, and that they wished the other to respond. Or they might wish to interject using more subtle cues such as using raising or falling intonation, facial expressions, gestures, or other non-verbal cues.

5.1 Implication for the Classroom

This study raises the pedagogical question of which tasks should be implemented in a L2 curriculum. Many recent writers on the subject of classroom tasks have taken their cues from the task typology of Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993) and presented the jigsaw task-type and, to a lesser extent, the information-gap task-type as “the gold standard” of classroom tasks, the task-types which should most frequently be made part of an L2 curriculum. This has been due to a focus on negotiation as the basis for SLA.

For researchers who have chosen to base their thinking on this theoretical framework, there is a justification for applying the information-gap task to other tasks. Based on the findings of the present research, it is expected that the task-type used here will provide the necessary conditions for students to interact. Nevertheless, as demonstrated here, dyadic activities do not automatically result in negotiated interaction among the participants.

It would seem from these results that the information-gap tasks offer opportunities for negotiation. Unfortunately, choosing tasks on the basis of interactional modification alone cannot guarantee that students will acquire the skills necessary for successful SLA. Indeed, results of this study show that the task generated a discourse which was characterized by both greater syntactic complexity and greater length of turns. Students spoke freely and at greater length on this task.

In addition to the results of this study, classroom instructors are best advised to take an approach which includes “a little bit of this and a little bit of that” when designing their curriculum: selections from the high interactional feature task-type grouping and selections from the high words-per-turn task-type grouping. L2 learners need to practice engaging in more than one type of discourse. They need to practice interactional discourse functions in their L2. The ideal curriculum should include a variety of tasks, which should not be restricted to tasks from one task-type grouping or another.

Another, very practical suggestion is that instructors not overlook any task when they are designing their curriculum. In the preparation of a new task, or in the adoption of an existing one, we must keep in mind that task design can be very time-

consuming. Thus, when designing a task, we should certainly pay attention to how long it will take to prepare it, as well as how long it will take for the students to complete it successfully. Indeed, one of the problems associated with some of the tasks currently used in the normal classroom is that they seem to require more teacher preparation and materials than other kinds of tasks which also generated productive language. Not only does this task-type involve minimal preparation, it has the additional benefit of allowing learners to work on their own or in pairs and can be adapted to suit the particular needs and interests of those learners. Learners will appreciate this extra effort and respond with greater enjoyment and enthusiasm for classroom tasks.

5.2 Cultural Constraints

The results of the study revealed that cultural background plays a role in the acquisition of language. The cultural background of this group of students is Asian, but they are very active in class. They enjoyed being in the language classroom and no one forced them to be in class. This helps in showing their ability to act naturally in learning. Not only are the students willingly enjoying the task, but they also exhibited their natural manner of communication. This may be because they have been studying together for two courses and they are accustomed to a European learning style. That is, they must do everything on their own and they need to think for and do the activities by themselves. Sometimes they make mistakes but these mistakes do not cause communication breakdown, they allow the flow of the task

and they seemed to be happy when their peers corrected their mistakes, as can be seen in student pairs 5 to 10. However, we are still living in the environment of “the Culture of Face”. There were some “Face” issues in the study. Losing face in a classroom is a big matter for most Thai students. They will lose confidence and feel shy among their peers, as shown in student-pairs 1 to 4. These pairs always follow the patterns and try to keep the sentences simple, with as few mistakes as possible. They are aware of every word they make and they try to fix the mistakes as they go along. This is the reason why the number of Words, Turns, and WPT were varying.

Therefore, in selecting tasks for students, there are several factors that need to be taken into consideration. Lastly, to overcome the “Face” issue, the teacher needs to be a part of that activity and encourage the students to do their best, and when they are used to the activity, they will eventually learn the language.

5.3 Limitation of the Current Study and Suggestions for Future Research

The preceding results are presented with some reservation in view of the fact that only one class within the same language institution participated in the study. Owing to the low number of examples in this study, the generalisability of the findings to other populations is reduced, and verification with larger numbers is essential if these findings are to be supported. A low number of dyads were chosen in the present study so as not to complicate the results of the study aims and make it easier to understand the language produced by the student-pairs. A small number of

dyads benefited in terms of researcher concentration which focus mainly on student-pair language patterns and participation during the study.

Secondly, task-related variability may be related to other constructs not examined here, such as topic. In this respect, there may be other important differences within the Interactional functions that are unexplored.

A third limitation is the actual methods and materials used for eliciting data from the subjects. The results of this study, as in many other similar studies, could be criticized as being the artifacts of the instrument used to elicit the data. Yet the current study gives us insight into the interactional discourse functions elicited by NNS, what is needed for the advancement of knowledge in this area is to study the notion of task-type across a wider range of tasks. Furthermore, data elicited from subjects in a controlled experiment such as this, as opposed to data taken from the more naturalistic setting of the classroom, may have resulted in a different sample of the learners' discourse features.

Another question which this study does not address, pertains to lexical and syntactic complexity. A noticeable difference comes from the types of discourse. As reported in the findings, information-gap task turns tended not only to be larger, but also to contain some complex constructions of syntax as well. This analysis, therefore suggests implications for further research. Another dependent variable worth studying is the type-token ratio, which would measure lexical variation resulting from task-type. This will give us insight and detailed data of the individual language patterns which could measure A against B or the ratio of A to B.

Despite its limitations, the results of this study have laid the basic work for further investigation into the construct of task-related variability. As with much research, this study has raised more questions and, as is frequently the case, more follow-up research is called for. Researchers are encouraged to investigate the differences within and across task-types, in an effort to produce a clearer picture of the relative contributions of tasks and task-types to SLA.

To conclude this study, an information-gap task can produce a variety of interactional discourse functions and words-per- turn, which supports the claim of the task-typology of Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993). However, in order to assist learners in their L2 acquisition, the task-typology needs more language skill strategies. Rather, it is to the students' benefit to engage in the task and to practice language skills. Learners need to acquire and practice many different types of skills before they achieve proficiency in the L2. The students need to be familiar with strategies which will help them in making their L2 more comprehensible; they need to be able to successfully signal to their conversation partners when they lack comprehension, and they need to be able to formulate their opinions, ideas and responses using their newly acquired vocabulary and syntax. In conclusion to this study, it can be seen that an information-gap task is another useful task to use in classes.