# Seeding of Pre-task and In-task Materials in "Unrestricted" Spoken Activities

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*A difficulty faced when designing an oral English course, is combining the provision of language-input data with student opportunity to use language freely without prescribed restrictions. The findings of this article suggest that even when asking students to perform what are intended as 'unrestricted' language tasks, learners inevitably 'mine' wordings contained in pre-task and task materials when performing tasks. This was found to be the case even though the teacher did not explicitly draw learner attention to these wordings. However, this was found to be true only with written materials, and that learners did not appear to mine specific wordings from audio pre-task materials.*

*This paper suggests that, especially with low-level students, teachers may wish to deliberately embed specific language items into pre-task and task materials students use when performing what are intended to be "unrestricted" spoken activities, while acknowledging arguments that such seeding of input might be considered inconsistent with principles behind a unrestricted task-fronted approach to lesson design.*

# The 'conflict' between provision of data and student self-expression

Among the many goals a teacher may have for an oral English course, two will likely be:

1.  To give students in-class opportunities to speak freely. That is, activities which place emphasis students conveying meaning to obtain an objective, rather than demonstrating use of any prescribed language form.
2.  To expose students to models of language in use and language *data*, in the hopes of expanding the repertoire of English learners use and have at their disposal.

A common methodology in ELT, found in many coursebooks for example, is to begin a lesson with the provision models of language in use, often in the form of readings or dialogues. These models are then followed by of an explicit focus on language data contained in the models. Finally, students are to perform spoken activities employing their English freely and communicatively.

It feels fair to give learners models to emulate when attempting to speak themselves, especially low level learners. While this lesson sequence provides students with language data, it has been criticized on the grounds that it is difficult to see how this sequence allows students to speak 'freely and communicatively.' As Willis (1990: 73) points out, students are likely to see activities that follow exposure to models of language-in-use not as a chance to communicate freely, but as an opportunity to produce forms found

in the models as often as possible. If so, then such activities are what Scrivener, (1996: 84) would label as "restricted" language learning activities which impose limitations on the language to employ, i.e. students will feel expected to use the language prescribed by the materials. As Thornbury (1998: 111) puts it : "It is inconsistent to say to learners, on the one hand, "Say whatever you mean," and on the other (for example), "Use the third conditional".

Teachers could avoid this inconsistency by designing a course with some lessons asking students to examine language data and practice (replicate) using it, and other lessons dedicated what Scrivener (1996: 83) calls "authentic" use of language, where students can employ any language they have at their disposal.

## Resolving the 'conflict' between provision of data and student self-expression

Perhaps dividing activities into those labeled "restricted" and those labeled "authentic" creates a rigid and somewhat artificial divide, as Nunan (2001b: vi) points out:

> Most drills and exercises require reproductive language use, although communicative tasks can also involve reproductive language use. For example, a classroom survey in which a student has to identify classmates' food preferences is both reproductive (the speaker will reproduce the predictable forms from the survey) and also communicative (he or she doesn't know how the interlocutor will respond).

An approach suggested to combine both authentic and restricted language use in a single lesson is to *begin* lessons with communicative tasks. While authentic language use could be used to simply to stimulate the use of

language for some general performance area, such as fluency, or an aspect of communicative competence, such activities can also be used to prepare the ground for activities that draw learner attention to the link between meanings and wordings (Bygate, Skehan and Swain 2001). This approach rests on the principle that:

> In natural SLA circumstances, learners begin by wanting to mean…and then go on to seek or notice wordings that express those meanings…It follows that materials we offer learners should allow them to focus first on meanings in context and then go on to look at the wordings that realize the meanings (Willis, 2000: 7).

A suggested lesson sequence from J. Willis (1996) is for lessons to begin with a spoken task, for example, 'Find three things you did last week that your [task] partner(s) did not.' Learners are successful if they can achieve the outcome (find three differences) regardless of the accuracy of the wordings they chose to employ. A focus on wordings then follows the task where learners analyze recordings and transcripts of fluent target-language speakers performing similar tasks. The lesson begins with a *need to mean* with the tasks also intended to set up learners to notice features from the lesson's post-task language focus stage, because they had a need for such features while attempting the task (Thornbury, 1999: 134). When teaching students who will only be enrolled in a speaking course for a short time, such as in many university English courses in Japan (fifteen, 90 minute lessons per course), the sequence above seems a time-efficient way to combine students speaking freely with exposing students to language data.

## Concessions to the Realities of the Classroom

Whatever the theoretical SLA and time-efficiency advantages to Willis' (1996) approach, some teachers may rightfully feel that this approach is too

"ambitious" for some of their students. For example, many Japanese university students' English ability appears to be quite low, and there is the problem of learners outright *balking* at the challenge of attempting authentic communicative tasks sequenced at the beginning of a lesson. Students simply may lack confidence in their ability to undertake such activities.

Willis (1996) acknowledges that tasks need setting up with a pre-task stage, at the very least to give task instructions. One purpose of pre-task preparation is to establish for learners what the task's communicative goal and communicative context are. Willis further acknowledges that students may need to be given ideas on how to approach the task, and suggests possibly playing recordings of fluent TL speakers performing tasks *before* learners are to undertake them.

## Language Input In Pre-Task And Task Materials

An unresolved issue is whether a task-based approach, precludes the use of linguistically enhanced pre-task input. As noted earlier, Nunan (2001b) believes that tasks can include 'reproductive' language use, where learners reproduce language models provided by the teacher, textbook, or some other source. Whereas, Willis (1990) believes that providing language models prior to tasks likely will cause learners to concentrate more on remembering and replicating the formulae as accurately as possible than on communicating meaning. While noting that during the pre-task stage some language input is inevitable, Willis believes that exposure to any particular language forms should be intended as *incidental*.

## Mining Language Input from Pre-task and Task Materials

The purpose of this paper is not to take sides on issue of whether it is

'permissible' to linguistically enhance pre-task and task input, while still acknowledging this is a contentious point. The primary focus here is simply to find whether learners use language items found in pre-task and task materials during task performance when teachers do not *explicitly* draw learner attention to these language features.

What Willis (1990) calls 'incidental exposure' to language input during the pre-task stage may underestimate how much language input learners take, or 'mine,' from pre-task/ task materials. Samuda (2001) recorded a group of four, high beginner/low-intermediate learners performing a task that required them to look at the alleged contents of a person's pockets, and to hypothesize the person's name, sex, age and marital status. The group was required to register the degree of probability/possibility of their four hypotheses under the following headings.

| HOW CERTAIN ARE YOU? | | |
|---|---|---|
| Less then 50% Certain (It's possible) | 90% Certain (It's probable) | 100% Certain (It's certain) |

**Figure 1.** Extract from task chart (Samuda, 2001: 127)

Samuda (2001: 127–128) found that during the learner performance of the task, out of 124 learner expressions of probability/possibility, 33 (26%) of these expressions were conveyed using items 'mined' from the task materials. These were *(it's) possible, (it's) probable, 90%, certain*, and *50%*. The remaining 91 (74%) of learner expressions of possibility/probability were items mobilized from their existing interlanguage. These were *maybe, (I'm) sure, (I'm) not sure*.

## Research Questions

Firstly, if learners are mining written pre-task and task materials for language input, do they also do so when exposed to pre-task audio recordings? Even when the playing of pre-task recordings is *not* meant to recommend any particular wordings to learners, recordings are either deliberately scripted to include specific pre-selected wordings; or the lesson will eventually focus upon specific language features found (often repeatedly) within authentic recordings. Do learners 'mine' language input from both written and audio pre-task and task materials?

Second, if learners do mine language from pre-task input, can specific language features be embedded into the input? Do learners 'mine' and employ these structures even when the teacher does not explicitly draw their attention to these features?

## Subjects

During a semester of teaching a course comprised of task-based lessons, I recorded two classes of low-level (false beginner), Japanese, university students performing the same task. Over a three-week period, each week a different task was performed. One class listened to **two** to **four** audio recordings *prior* to tasks (labeled 'RPT'), while the other class listened to the recordings *after* tasks (labeled 'RAT'). In the first week, I recorded one pair of RPT and one pair of RAT learners, in the second week a different pair of RPT and RAT learners, and in the third week another pair of RPT learners and three pairs of RAT learners.

# Minimizing learner focus on wordings during pre-task activities

Task-activities taken from the students' coursebook were edited to ensure that specific language features in, for example, the form of model dialogues or 'speech bubble' prompts, were not embedded in the materials. The task instructions and materials given to the students are shown below exactly as presented to the learners.

Pre-task listening activities did not overtly focus learner attention on specific language structures contained in the audio recordings. Take, for example, the coursebook listening activities below.
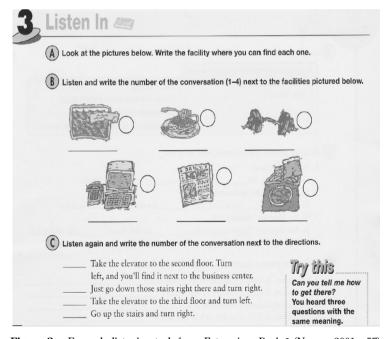


**Figure 2.** Example listening task from *Expressions Book 1* (Nunan, 2001a: 57)

Only listening activities similar to steps 'A' and 'B' above were performed during the pre-task stage, as these focus only on displaying comprehension (which can be displayed non-verbally); whereas, step 'C' and the 'Try this' step require students to recall and focus upon specific wordings from the audio recordings.

## Tasks 1 and 2: Mining Written, Not Audio, Input

Task 1:

1. Task Instructions and Materials:



**Figure 3.** Task activity from *Expressions Book 1* (Nunan, 2001a:108)
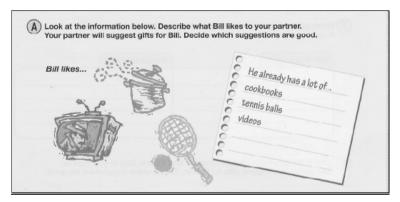
2. Example textbook recordings (2 of 4, 'Let's [verb]' and 'How about [verb] + ~ing,' recurring in alternate recordings)

> **W1:** Julian is leaving on Friday, we'll have to get him a present.
> **M1:** What does he like?
> **W1:** Well, he likes music.
> **M2:** OK, let's get him a CD.
> **W1:** No, he has hundreds of CD's
>
> **M2:** John's going away on Sunday.

> **M3:** What can we get him?
> **M2:** He loves to eat out. **How about taking** him
>     out to dinner?
> **M3:** No, he's on a diet.

**Figure 4.** Recordings from *Expressions Book 1: TAE* ((Nunan, 2001b: T105)

## Learner performance of Task 1

When performing Task1, both the RPT and RAT pairs mined the words 'suggest' and 'suggestion' from the written task instructions to make gift suggestions (see Fig. 5 below). While the recordings contain the phrases 'Let's [verb]' and 'How about [verb] + ing' to make suggestions, the RPT pair seemed uninfluenced by this, instead using the mined words 'suggest' and 'suggestion'. All learners initiated exchanges by stating what a person likes (e.g. 'Connie likes going to gym') or by asking 'What does [name] like?' whether they listened to pre-task recordings or not, making it less likely that the RPT pair mined these wordings from the audio input.

| RPT Pair Production | RAT Pair Production |
|---|---|
| **S2:** **What does Bill like?**<br>**S1:** Bill likes cooking, TV, maybe watch videos and playing tennis<br>**S2:** I **suggest** tennis balls<br>**S1:** No<br>**S2:** Why? Already has?<br>**S1:** Yes<br>**S2:** I **suggest** tennis club<br>.<br>.<br>.<br>**S1:** Bill likes cooking.<br>**S2:** I **suggest** recipe<br>**S1:** He already has cookbooks, | **S1:** I start, **Connie likes going to gym.**<br>**S2:** I **suggest** you to buy exercise clothes.<br>**S1:** She already has a lot of work out clothes, is same mean as exercise clothes.<br>**S2:** Bad **suggestion.** You have **suggestion?**<br>**S1:** I **suggest** to buy her member's card for Gym.<br>**S2:** Good.<br>**S1:** What does Bill like? |

**Figure 5.** Excerpts of Task 1 pair performance

Similar results were found from learner performance of the self-made task below. Students mine input from written task materials in lieu of audio pre-task input.

Task 2:

1. Task Instructions/Materials:

> (a) Look at the list of names of students in this class. Do not talk to anyone! Put the names into these two categories: <u>Names I Remember</u>   <u>Names I Forget</u>
>
> (b) Your partner will ask you if you know the students whose names they can't remember. You cannot point your fingers.

**Figure 6.** Written Instructions for Task 1

2. Example Textbook Recording (1 of 4, 'Do you know' and 'What does ＿＿＿ look like' in all recordings)

> **W1: Do you know** Brian Morgan?
> **M1:** I'm not sure. **What does he look like?**
> **W1:** Well, he's kind of short, with short blond hair. And he has a cute smile.
> **M1:** Does he have glasses?
> **W1:** No he don't.

**Figure 7.** Recordings from *Expressions Book 1: TAE* (Nunan, 2001b: T25)

## Learner performance of Task 2

Neither RPT pair learners used the structure 'Do you know [name]?' or 'What does [name/he/she] look like' while performing Task 2; despite hearing it repeated in *all four* recordings. Rather, both RPT and RAT pairs

asked, "Who is [name]?" or mined the categories under which they had to place student names: **Names I Forget** and **Names I Remember**. Often, pairs took the words 'forget' and 'remember' and attempted to form indirect questions (e.g. 'I forget who is Hitomi', for, 'I forget who Hitomi is') (see Figure 8).

| RPT Pair. | RAT Pair. |
|---|---|
| **S1:** **Who** is Ayaka? | **S1:** Who start? |
| **S2:** She has glasses and is soft hair. | **S2:** *Dozo* [go ahead] |
| **S1:** Wearing yellow shoes? | **S1:** **I forget who is** Tatsuya. |
| **S2:** Yes. **I forget who is** Ken. | **S2:** Yes. Tatsuya is skin head |
| **S1:** He is the tall boy. | **S1:** Oh. Ok. Next, **who is Hitomi?** |
| **S2:** Most tall of us? | **S2:** She is pretty girl. She has "Mondo" shirts. |
| **S1:** That's right. | **S1:** Blue shirts? |
| **S2:** O.k. | **S2:** Yes, Yes. |
| **S1:** **I forget, who is** Matsuyama Junko. | **S1:** O.k. |
| **S2:** She is so so tall. She does not have glasses. She have short hair. Color is orange. | **S2:** **I forget, who is** Sayoko. |
| **S1:** I see. | **S1:** She is shy girl. She has black, middle long hair. |
| **S2:** **Can you remember who** is Eri Matsubayashi? | **S2:** Does she wearing jeans? |
| | **S1:** No jeans···khaki pants. |
| | **S2:** Ah. |

**Figure 8.**   Excerpts of Task 2 Pair Performance

## Summary and reflections on learner performance of Tasks 1 and 2

With such a small sampling of student task production, any conclusions will have to be tentative. Nevertheless, the data above appears to indicate that low-level learners do not mine whole structures or phrases from pre-task audio recordings. That the learners did not mine input from the audio recordings was somewhat surprising, given that the RPT learners listened

to the audio recordings multiple (3-4) times before being able to complete the listening comprehension activities. Playing pre-task recordings, therefore, may not result in low-level learners focusing on and employing specific language features from the audio input, unless teachers *explicitly* draw learner attention to these features.

## Task 3: Manipulating Language Input In Written Task Materials

Learner performance of Tasks 1 and 2 above, show use of input mined from the written task materials. This opens up the possibility of covertly 'seeding' written task materials with wordings for learners to mine and use during task production. For example, in Task 1 above, the coursebook deliberately included the sentence, "He already has a lot of…" which learners did mine (see also Figure 3 above):

**RAT Pair  S2: I suggest** you to buy exercise clothes.

**S1: She already has a lot of** work out clothes, is same mean as exercise clothes.

**RPT Pair  S2: I suggest** tennis balls

**S1:** No

**S2:** Why? Already has?

In the following task, I recorded one RPT pair, and three RAT pairs. Each RAT pair were given differently worded task instructions, all other written task materials being the same for all three RAT pairs.

# Three differently worded task instructions

Task 3:

1a. Task Instructions for the RPT Pair and RAT Pair 1

Look at the *Work In Pairs* chart below.

With your partner, find out what Bob, Karen, Philip and Joan's schedules are for next week. Choose what you think is the best time for everyone to go see a movie next week.

**Figure 9.** Task instructions for RPT Pair and RAT Pair 1

1b. Instructions for RAT Pair 2

Look at the *Work In Pairs* chart below.

With your partner, find out what Bob, Karen, Philip and Joan's are going to do next week. Choose what you think is the best time for everyone to see a movie next week.

**Figure 10.** RAT Pair 2 Task Instructions

1c. Instructions for RAT Pair 3

Look at the *Work In Pairs* chart below.

With your partner, find out what Bob, Karen, Philip and Joan's plans are next week. Choose what you think is the best time for everyone to see a movie next week.

**Figure 11.** RAT Pair 3 Task Instructions

## 2. Task Materials

| | Friday Evening | Saturday Afternoon | Saturday Evening | Sunday Afternoon | Sunday Evening |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bob | work late | _____ | meet boss at airport | _____ | prepare for a meeting |
| Karen | _____ | free | _____ | go shopping | _____ |
| Philip | free | _____ | free | _____ | free |
| Joan | _____ | take car to garage | _____ | bake cookies | _____ |

**Figure 12.** Task activity from *Expressions Book 1* (Nunan: 2001a: 92)

## 3. Example textbook recordings (1 of 2, 'going to ⋯ ' recurring in both recordings)

**W2:** Hello. Can I speak to Jim, please?
**M4:** Speaking.
**W2:** Oh, Jim. Hi! It's Nina. Say, do you want to go to the movies? There's a new science fiction movie on at Movie World.
**M4:** I'm sorry, I can't. **I'm going** out with Judy tonight.

**Figure 13.** Recording from *Expressions Book 1 TAE* (Nunan, 2001b: T89)

### Learner performance of Task 3

Both RPT Pair 1 and RAT Pair 1 mined the word 'schedule' from the task instructions and used it frequently during production, asking questions like, 'What is Joan's schedule?' However, neither pair mined 'next week' despite it being underlined. More interestingly, both pairs used 'will' rather than the present progressive ("I'm going…"). The RPT group did so despite the present progressive being the 'future tense' heard on the recordings.

| RPT Pair Task Production | RAT Pair 1 Task Production |
|---|---|
| **S1:** What is Bob's **schedule** on Friday evening? | **S1:** Is Bob free Friday evening? |
| **S2:** He will prepare for a meeting, what **will** Karen do Friday evening? | **S2:** No, he **will** work late. |
| **S1:** She **will** clean her apartment. | **S1:** Friday evening what will Philip do? |
| **S2:** Can Bob go to a movie Sunday afternoon? | **S2:** He has free time. |
| **S1:** Yes, he **schedule** is free, Joan's **schedule** is free in Sunday afternoon? | **S1:** What is Joan **schedule** Saturday afternoon? |
| | **S2:** She **will** take car to garage, what is Karen's schedule? |
| | **S1:** Karen **will** be free Saturday afternoon |

**Figure 14.** Excerpts of RPT Pair and RAT Pair 1, Task 3 performance.

RAT Pair 2 and RAT Pair 3 also mined input from their differently worded task instructions. RAT Pair 2 mined 'be going to' from their task instructions; RAT Pair 3 mined the word 'plan(s)' from theirs. Both pairs employed 'will' from their existing interlanguage (see: Figure 15 below).

| RAT Pair 2 Task Production | RAT Pair 3 Task Production |
|---|---|
| **S1:** What is Bob **going to** do Saturday evening? | **S1:** What is Bob **plan** Saturday afternoon? |
| **S2:** He going to go to meet boss at airport. What **will** Karen do Saturday afternoon ? | **S2:** Bob **plan** to meeting. |
| **S1:** She **going to** be free time. | **S1:** Meeting? |
| **S2:** O.k. What Karen is **going to** do Sunday afternoon? | **S2:** Go to meeting. |
| **S1:** She is going to go to shopping. What **will** Bob doing Sunday evening? | **S1:** Uh⋯What **will** Bob doing Sunday afternoon? |
| **S2:** He **will** prepare for meeting. | **S2:** Bob **plan** is free. What is he **plan** Friday evening? |
| | **S1:** Bob? |
| | **S2:** Yes |
| | **S1:** Bob **will** work late. |

**Figure 15.** Excerpts of Rat Pair 2 and RAT Pair 3, Task 3 performance.

(Note: I am sure readers will notice the flaw in the design of Task 3, 1b. The mismatch between the linguistic focus 'be going to' the writer uses in the

written instructions and the present progressive (albeit using the lexical verb 'go') in the recording. Nevertheless, the fact RPT Pair 2 mined 'be going to' from the rewritten task instructions still stands).

## Summary of learner performance of Task 3

The findings from Task 3 bolster previous observations that low-level learners do not appear to mine whole structures from pre-task audio input. Rather, it seems that low-level learners mine linguistic input from *written* pre-task and task materials to incorporate into their spoken task production. From the RPT Pair 2 task-performance, it appears possible to plant specific input into written pre-task/task materials for learners to mine.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Learner mining of pre-task/task input is an understudied factor to consider when designing tasks for the classroom and this research needs repeating with a larger sampling of students at a variety of learner levels. It does appear however, from this pilot study, that not only is some language input inevitable during the pre-task and task stage, it appears that learner mining of, at least, written language input is inevitable as well. Therefore, teachers *may* also to be able to 'seed' written pre-task input with pre-selected wordings in the deliberate hope that learners mine and employ those wordings.

The seeding of pre-task input may strike some as perhaps undermining the 'spirit' of a task-based approach. However, any debate over whether 'authentic language use' tasks can include linguistically enhanced pre-task and task input materials may never be resolved. As Skehan (1998: 96) notes, '[the] two underlying characteristics of tasks, avoidance of specific

structures, and engagement of worthwhile meanings, are matters of degree, rather than being categorical.' activities should be viewed as being on a spectrum and that they merge into one another; despite which, one end consists of manifestly authentic language use activities and the other equally clearly consisting of reproductive activities.

I suggest that if the most natural task instructions happen to include specific structures that also comprise the lesson's language focus; so be it. For example, in my experience, task instructions such as 'Find out who has been to the most foreign countries' causes learners to attempt to use the present perfect, both in their questions and in responses, yet there is really no other way to word these instructions. The same was true in the task materials for **Task 1** above (**Figure 3**: the 'Make-a-suggestion' task). Due to the somewhat artificial nature of this task, the materials had to provide learners with a readymade reason to reject suggestions. Learners were told that, 'He/She already has a lot of….' and learners mined all, or part, of this sentence during task production. I also put forward that deliberately embedding pre-selected language formulae into natural sounding instructions falls far short of a 'mechanical' focusing on form.

Teachers, like surgeons, have to perform a type of triage when sequencing lesson activities. Teachers design lessons by deciding towards which end of the "authentic language use" vs. "reproductive" spectrum is most appropriate for any particular group of students. The realities of the classroom mean that lessons, especially those aimed at easing low-confidence, low-ability students into authentic language use activities, may not replicate the ideal task-based lessons presented in the ELT literature. It is up to the individual teacher to find ways of resolving the conflicting

needs of providing language data-input to learners with the opportunity students to engage in unrestricted communication.

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