《論文》

Introducing Task-Based Syllabus Design
and Task-Based Language Teaching in Japan

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Since the 1980s, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has become popular as one of the developed forms of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), based on the criticisms of the structuralists' approach, and has become popular with many successful cases reported. However, researchers disagree about its relevance, especially in the Japanese context. This study reviews the language learning theories concerning TBLT and the task-based syllabus (TBS). It examines the optimal conditions for introducing them primarily in the context of Japanese junior and senior high schools.

Keywords: Task-based syllabus, Task-Based Language Teaching, Strengths and weaknesses, Junior and senior high school in Japan, Task-supported language teaching

1. Introduction

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) emerged out of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) with its own set of principles (Ellis, 2003). Focusing on completing everyday tasks in the real world, it was the natural progression from CLT. Learners use the language rather than learn the language, in an approach that contrasts with traditional teacher-led classes that teach isolated grammatical items (Willis, 1996). Its emphasis is on meaning and content appropriateness rather than speech accuracy. Language education in Japan is known for its traditional approach to language learning with teacher-led classes. Many language activities have focused on having students intentionally use grammatical items and vocabulary sets in advance as learning goals and then accurately reproduce them. It may seem unlikely for TBLT and a Task-Based Syllabus (TBS) to be implemented in specific contexts, such as Japanese public schools, for these approaches prioritize a more comprehensive and holistic approach, primarily focusing on meaning and assessment based on outcomes (Skehan, 1996, p.20). However, the situation has steadily evolved with recent changes in ministerial reforms on English education and subsequent innovation in English language teaching to more communicative approaches (Abe, 2021).

This paper will begin by discussing language learning theories concerning TBS, followed by exploring the strengths and weaknesses of TBS. From there, it puts forward contexts appropriate for TBLT and TBS, namely Japanese junior and senior high schools. It argues that although not ideal, a full TBS should be preceded by task-supported teaching.

2. Language learning theories

This section explores language learning theories that have shaped TBS and definitions of the terms concerning TBS.

There are four assumptions about the nature of language that are influential in explaining the parameters of any TBS (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.226-8), "1) language is primarily a means of making meaning, 2) multiple models of language inform TBLT, 3) lexical units are central in language use and language learning, and 4) conversation is the central focus of language and the keystone of language acquisition."

The sheer range of language theories influencing anything task-based helps us to understand how broad an approach it has become. One of the earliest task-based scholars explained that as meaning is primary, assessing the task must be in terms of its outcome (Nunan, 1988). This relates to the principle of language being a tool for creating meaning. During the 1980s, researchers studying the Lexical Syllabus observed that the lexical dimension of language was becoming more widely

acknowledged under the TBLT umbrella. (Willis & Willis, 2007, p.192) This research highlighted a growing recognition that language teaching should not only focus on grammar and syntax but also on vocabulary and how words are used in context. And so, connecting Nunan's and Willis's inputs with the nature of language assumption, Richards & Rogers (2001) explain clearly that TBLT tasks must involve conversation. This conclusive notion more or less defines TBLT in that its emphasis is on meaning rather than form. A further summary of language theories' influences is that supporters of TBLT utilize language models based on structural, functional, and interactional approaches. The TBS is not associated with just one language model but all three language theory models.

The TBS focuses on meaning and is based on the understanding that language acquisition is not linear but follows more complex and cyclical processes. The principles that form the basis of this approach derive from; educational philosophy, theories of how people acquire a second language, and research findings on effective teaching methods.

Krashen's Comprehensible Input theory supports TBS by emphasizing authentic materials. The chances of acquiring a second language increase when "learners are exposed to language which is just a little beyond their current level of competence" (Krashen 1981,1982; cited in Nunan 1991, p.50). Input propels the cognitive processes of learners to comprehend a message and works to guide their acquisition.

Long (1985, 1996) argued for the importance of the negotiating stage in communication, where learners concentrate on exchanging information in a meaningful way. This stage facilitates cognitive processing and results in language acquisition (Long and Crookes, 1992). According to them, these processes can be achieved through an analytic syllabus in which learners are required to perform communicative tasks and thus focus on negotiating meaning. This theory focuses on interaction which TBS has accounted for. Since tasks are a primary unit of organization, there will be adequate opportunities for interaction and negotiation of meaning to take place in the process of task completion.

Later, Krashen's theory was developed by Long's theory of a focus on form, where learners consciously focus on meaning during interaction while unconsciously processing language structures (Skehan, 1996, p.18-19). Here, our cognitive processes are seen as critical factors that lead to natural language acquisition. Importantly, learning is controlled by learn-

ers' internal processes over which the teacher has limited control, so teachers should not expect to see immediate or direct results from their teaching (Skehan, 1996, p.18-19). In any TBS, instead of receiving instruction on grammar, learners are considered to make hypotheses, generalizations, inferences, and reformulations about the target language system themselves.

The content for a TBS is a series of tasks designed according to learners' needs analyses. A TBS focuses on how acquisition occurs rather than what is to be learned. It can thus be classified as a process syllabus rather than a product syllabus; two syllabi that are generally considered to be incompatible (Nunan, 1988, p.40).

Considering the equilibrium between meaning-focused and form-focused activities, definitions of a task can be placed on a continuum from strong to weak. A 'strong version' of TBLT places tasks as "the central component of syllabus design" (Butler, 2011, p.38). However, Ellis's 'weaker version' (2003) uses tasks for communication practice alongside a syllabus focusing on grammar or functions, making it less task-based and more explicit in teaching language forms. Ellis's definition (2003, p.351) of task-supported language teaching (TSLT) is: "a teaching method that utilizes tasks to provide free practice in the use of a specific linguistic feature that has been previously presented and practiced in exercises."

3. Critiques of TBS

After having examined language learning theories concerning TBS, this section will discuss the weaknesses of TBS before exploring its strengths. It uses these balanced views to explore implementation in Japanese junior and senior high schools.

The first problem with the TBS is related to its design, specifically the syllabus design. To ensure that the syllabus progresses in difficulty, teachers need to determine the level of difficulty for each task prior to organizing them into units. However, Nicholson (2014, p.265) states that the task difficulty is influenced by several variables, making this process more complex. For example, Ellis (2003, p.67) names three factors that influence task difficulty: characteristics of the task, learners as individuals, and methodologies. These factors make task grading even more difficult (Nicholson, 2014, p.265). In addition, teachers in Japanese schools are required to design materials according to approved textbooks, which

limits teachers' influence on course design.

A further weakness of TBS is its unclarity (Kotaka, 2013), which may lead to teacher anxiety. Carless (2009, p.62) discusses the challenges that TBLT implementation presents for teachers in terms of both theory and practice. He observes that the extensive array of grammatical options in TBLT can provide flexibility while also presenting a perceived level of difficulty. (ibid.) He explains that such flexibility allows experienced teachers to select the most appropriate options for their teaching scenario. However, he acknowledges that less experienced teachers may struggle with the increased complexity of TBLT.

TBS is not broadly implemented across institutions in Japan because it does not offer the controlled learning outcomes provided by traditional approaches or syllabuses. TBLT lacks what appear to be the advantages of the grammar-based syllabus: "clear, tangible goals, precise syllabuses, and a comfortingly itemizable basis for the evaluation of effectiveness" (Skehan, 1998, p.94). The success of a grammar-based syllabus is seen by the security of teachers who have some control over the language items to expect in their classrooms (Edwards and Willis, 2005). For many teachers, learner-centered, communication-focused activities using a task-based approach could potentially make them feel anxious without clear visions of what is happening and what will happen in students' learning.

The final weakness of a TBS critiqued here is the absence of direct grammar instruction. According to Sato (2010, p.191), the efficacy of TBLT, particularly in teaching grammar, may be open to scrutiny. And relation to task-based teaching approaches, Butler (2005) found that teachers who use role-play activities raised concerns about students' using, and eventually learning, false phrases. Such cases could enhance fossilization if not properly planned in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts.

4.　Strengths of a TBS

This section addresses the strengths of TBS. One of the most significant strengths is that task-based learning is consistent with theories of second language acquisition (Ellis, 2003; Long & Crookes, 1992; Willis &Willis, 2007). Synthetic Type A syllabi are based on the assumption that one form of language is acquired at a time. On the other hand, TBS aims to promote the development of greater fluency and more natural language acquisition by emphasizing activities that focus on meaning, fostering learner-centered interactions, and reducing teacher control. (Willis, 1996, p.18). It also emphasizes real-world language use, which explains how languages are learned through more complicated cognitive processes than formal grammar-focused syllabuses. (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.223). Such strength can give confidence to teachers pursuing this practice.

There is an evolution of views towards TBLT/TBS, and its adaptability makes it ideal in Japanese schools. TBLT is often misunderstood as solely involving group work on speaking activities, and that it does not involve teaching grammar. Cutrone (2018) makes clear, in an interview with Rod Ellis, that TBLT integrates the four skills, teaches grammar, and can be used in teacher-centered classes.

In addition, such meaning-focused activities in natural settings outside teacher control discussed above intrinsically motivate learners by giving ample opportunities to use the language they are familiar with "without penalizing them for inevitable failures in accuracy" (Willis & Willis, 2007, p.25). This can also be seen as one of the most important strengths of TBS. It is hard in EFL situations to maintain learners' motivation for L2. For instance, Willis and Willis (2007, p.182) suggested that learners were not motivated by an approach to language learning that focused primarily on grammar. This is likely because this approach did not demonstrate to learners how they could apply the language in real-life situations. On the other hand, Nicholson (2014, p.263) states that tasks can be intrinsically motivating, especially when they are made relevant and interesting to the learners. Richards (2001, p.175) also suggests that providing learners with tasks that expose them to authentic language and cultural information can be a more effective way to motivate them. These tasks give learners a sense of how the language can be used in real-world contexts, which can be engaging for Japanese students in an EFL context.

Another benefit of TBS is that it enables learners to practice selecting and using appropriate language in a more comprehensive way rather than simply focusing on isolated linguistic items. This approach encourages learners to view language as a whole system rather than as individual pieces, as Brown (1994) noted. To realize such an ideal situation for learning, teachers can create an environment where students experience the urgent necessity of using language and are presented with chances to apply it in the EFL context.

Finally, needs analysis customarily conducted at an initial stage of TBS designing helps ensure that the content taught in classes

is more likely to be pertinent to the learners' requirements and preferences. Task-based approaches show significant flexibility for teachers to plan their lessons without specifying the type of language to be taught. They can be customized to suit different instructional settings, including teaching English for specific purposes and classes with mixed ability levels ranging from novice to advanced learners. Using tablets can realize a personalized learning environment and allow them to work with others of similar proficiency, a setting that works to help build confidence and develop their intrinsic motivation to speak in English. This strength could fit Japan well as all students have tablets distributed to them under the 2021 GIGA School Program[1].

5. Arguments for choosing TBS in Japan

Can a TBS be implemented in Japan? Section 4 has outlined the advantages of TBS, which are often the primary factors influencing the decision to adopt this teaching method in classrooms. This section argues several reasons that support this and what is needed for a smooth implementation of TBS in the Japanese junior and senior high school context.

5.1 Recent studies supporting TBLT/TBS implementation in Japan

Japan has not had a top-down push to incorporate TBLT as other Asian countries have but has had a continued push for CLT approaches since 1987. However, researchers are looking at TBLT in Japanese schools, and their findings provide data on how to implement TBS in this setting successfully. Harris (2016, p.112) surveyed 78 teachers and found that the criticisms outlined in section 3 were misplaced. His more recent research looked at teacher views in schools and found TBLT to develop creativity in students, freeing teachers in their belief that there is a single correct way to teach language (Harris, 2018, p.146). What these studies, and Sato (2010), call for is an approach to TBS that balances contextual realities with the flexible teaching approaches used in TBLT.

5.2 An ideal and natural language learning environment

As we have seen above, the TBS offers a learning environment that aligns with language learning theories, creating a more authentic and realistic learning experience for learners. Research on language learning has demonstrated that people do not acquire individual linguistic items in a simple, linear way as the teacher prescribes but rather as components of intricate relationships between form and function (Van den Branden, 2006, p.5). These strengths have the potential to lower teachers' concerns and anxiety presented in section 3.

Japanese junior and senior high schools, where opportunities for L2 language use are often limited outside the classroom especially in non-cosmopolitan areas, present a challenge for motivation and language function. For many students, the classroom provides the only opportunity to receive input, convey meaning, and achieve concrete results in the L2. A TBS fulfills a sense of purpose by providing actual use, as discussed in section 4.

TBLT functions as a powerful tool for teachers to intrinsically motivate students and integrate their four language skills while at the same time following ministerial objectives[2]. The grammar-translation approach is still widely used in Japanese schools, but there is potential for the task-based approach to provide exposure to authentic language (Richards, 2001, p.175). Harris (2018), who successfully implemented TBS in one Japanese school in his study, says that teachers need clear guidance on what TBLT is before starting the program. From studies such as this, course creators have learned that to motivate learners, teachers should try to understand the notion underlying TBLT and encourage students to use the language holistically, as discussed in section 4.

5.3 Balance maintained by the weaker version (TSLT) and revised PPP[3]

As previously discussed in its strengths, TBLT can particularly be advantageous for learners who struggle with fluency since task-based methods are considered to promote the effective use

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[1] The GIGA school program aims to provide every student with a device and high-speed network in their schools, to enhance their learning experience and prepare them for Japan's "Society 5.0" (MEXT, 2019). According to the Cabinet Office (2020), "Society 5.0" is a society that prioritizes the well-being of humans and addresses social issues by leveraging a highly integrated system of cyberspace and physical space, while also promoting economic growth.

[2] For instance, the objectives of the curriculum guidelines for English education at high schools (MEXT, 2018) aim to develop competencies in communication through integrated language activities, including listening, reading, speaking, and

writing in foreign languages, to accurately and appropriately understand, express, and convey information and ideas.

[3] PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) is a language teaching method that involves introducing new language, providing opportunities for controlled practice, and encouraging learners to use the language in more communicative contexts (Skehan, 1998, p.9). Despite its widespread use in language education, PPP has been criticized for prioritizing accuracy and correctness over other important language learning goals.

of language resources. This strength might improve the situation in Japan, especially in the junior high context, where form-focused, PPP-oriented teaching practice prevails (Takashima, 2011, p.35). Considering the negative aspects of TBS, such as complexity and unclearness mentioned earlier, a balance would also be needed to promote the idea of TBLT. Full implementation of TBS with a stronger version of TBLT practice would be a high hurdle. However, a weaker version could help a more realistic implementation. According to Richards (2001, p.175), tasks can be used as one technique in the teacher's repertoire and can also be used in conjunction with other approaches, such as skill-based or text-based ones. Many approaches have been suggested to implement TBLT in combination with a form-focused approach or on focused tasks (Ellis, 2003), such as those put forward by Izumi (2009) and Matsumura (2011). Littlewood (2007, p.245) suggests that instead of rejecting TBLT, some approaches adapt it to suit the classroom context.

It is also possible to introduce task-supported language teaching with revised PPP. Takashima (2011) insists that approaches such as task-supported language teaching (TSLT) is applicable at the later stages of PPP. He insists it can be effective, especially in the EFL context in Japan, where teachers are asked to use materials according to nationally-approved textbooks. Those textbooks are adapting more meaning-focused and task-based activities after the implementation of new courses of study (MEXT, 2017; 2018). Also, there are more teaching practices where students are asked to do similar tasks twice, before and after teachers' scaffolding support and guidance (National Institute for Educational Policy Research, 2019, p.55; Yomogizawa, 2022, p.34, Matsuzawa, 2002, p.152). This adaption will support teachers and give students adequate time to practice and conclude textbook units with production stages in the lesson. According to Kotaka (2013, p.60), teachers can naturally incorporate task-based approaches into any lesson's presentation or production stages if the PPP approach is modified to include more of a communicative component and fewer mechanical activities. A flexible form-focused approach like this, especially in junior high schools, has the potential to compensate for the weakness of TBS lacking systematic grammar. Furthermore, TBLT fused with PPP limits the risk of fossilization in learners, as discussed in section 3 above.

5.4 MEXT's reform: a favorable change to schools and teacher education

In order to effectively put these measures into practice, teacher education programs are needed. Teachers need to be properly and adequately trained to assess the task and diagnose students' needs and language competence, flexibly sequencing tasks or language activities within their knowledge. In response to these realistic necessities, however, language education in Japanese public schools has been undergoing drastic reforms led by MEXT for over two decades. For example, it set new goals for English Language Education titled "Five proposals and specific measures for developing proficiency in English for international communication" (Commission on the Development of Foreign Language Proficiency) in 2011. This helped to start several attempts to improve their communicative aim. By implementing the new courses of study, MEXT requires modifications in how English is taught in classrooms. It has also made some efforts to change teacher education with the communicative aim (Abe, 2021), obliging language teachers to take tests such as the TOEIC and TOEFL (Commission on the Development of Foreign Language Proficiency, 2011). In addition, the number of non-Japanese teaching assistants was raised, and these English-speaking teachers, through social learning and different learning experiences, have the ability to support the growing skills of full-time classroom teachers. The policy not only affects all teachers' ability to start incorporating task-based approaches, but it also sets out the achievement goal of students' English proficiency that is more achievable through a task-based style instruction.

5.5 Growing autonomy and flexibility

The outline of the current reform, "English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Rapid Globalization" (MEXT, 2014), emphasizes the development of students' English proficiency for Japan's future. This policy and previous ones are increasingly shifting the power of what happens in the classrooms to local governments and teachers. The Ministry of Education stated that regional boards of education and individual teachers are responsible for implementing education that suits the needs and circumstances of respective regions (MEXT, 2017, 2018). Going further to state that every school develops an appropriate curriculum in compliance with the Basic Act on Education, the School Education Act, Reform item 5 (MEXT, 2014). Their support for training, which is fundamental to a TBLT/ TBS being realized, is seen by their effort to "conduct training seminars under collaboration with universities and external specialized agencies in the region." The

huge policy reform by MEXT could hopefully change the fixation of textbooks to more teachers' freedom in choosing their own materials. Encouragement from the official education system, as well as individual teachers' effort, is needed. TBLT, with the help of such a favorable tailwind of MEXT's reform, followed by each teacher's autonomy, can facilitate language learning through more communicative and task-based methods.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the principles of TBLT/TBS, considering language learning theories. The strengths and weaknesses of task-based approaches in syllabus design were also analyzed. Furthermore, potential uses and justifications for implementing and adjusting TBLT/TBS in Japanese secondary schools were discussed. Weaker versions of TBLT, task-supported language teaching (TSLT), as well as their potential adaptation to the presentation-practice-production (PPP) approach for the English language classroom in Japan have also been discussed.

While there may be many difficulties with the prompt and full implementation of TBS in Japanese junior and senior high schools, thus creating some debates among researchers, the notion of TBLT fundamentally matches Japan's current policy trends and future needs. It offers learners the potential to achieve L2 communicative competence and enhance their motivation. Implementing these methodologies in the Japanese EFL context requires careful and flexible adaptation, balancing both TBLT and PPP with MEXT reforms. It may take time, but supporting a weak version of TBLT/TBS will lead to solving the present fundamental problems rather than just superficially treating the 'symptoms.'

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