Research Digest

TBLT in Japan: Task-based Language Teaching and its Effective Implementation in the Japanese University Classroom

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Introduction

Within the field of second language teaching, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has come to the forefront of classroom methodology. Many researchers have argued that form-focused exercises and activities be pushed aside to make way for meaning-focused, task based interaction (Krashen, 1982; Nunan, 2004). Most contemporary course books claim to be either fully or partly 'task-based', and this appears to be the new language teaching orthodoxy. However, it seems possible that much of the 'task-based' praxis that appears in the university classroom is really just the same old presentation-practice-produce (PPP) methodology masquerading as TBLT. A greater understanding of the theory and research into TBLT, together with an analysis of the unique socio-cultural situation in Japanese universities, will help improve our teaching methodology and, consequently, learners will reap the benefits. This paper will, firstly, consider the unique socio-cultural factors of the Japanese educational system in general and the university classroom in particular. Secondly, theory and research into TBLT will be combined with Japanese socio-cultural analysis, in order to fuel recommendations for implementing TBLT in the university classroom.

The Japanese Social Context and Task-based Instruction

Before we examine the nature of tasks within the Japanese classroom, it is useful to take a step back and view the larger picture within which the classroom is located. Influences such as the community, the language teaching profession and the learner all act upon the classroom ecology to influence the way learning takes place.

The Community

At the level of public policy, English education has received high priority for many years, being made compulsory from junior high school to university. The strong resolve of authorities to educate Japanese citizens in English was firmly expressed in 2003, when the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (MEXT) announced a packaged program entitled Action Plan to "cultivate Japanese with English abilities" (MEXT, 2003). This watershed policy lowered the age of compulsory English education to elementary school (from 2011), designated certain Super English Language High Schools, made it mandatory for all public high school teachers of English to undergo teacher training programs, paved the way for an increase in Assistant Language Teachers from abroad, and urged all universities and colleges to reform their English language curriculum and entrance examinations (Torikai, 2005, p. 250).

Despite this strong support at the official level, community satisfaction is extremely low. After 8 years of English language instruction, most Japanese do not classify themselves as proficient users of English. I have noticed that one of the most common phrases spoken by my university students upon meeting a foreigner is "I can't speak English." Japanese Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL®) scores, as measured in 1998, were the lowest in Asia, a fact of which the Japanese themselves are 'painfully aware' (CJGTC 2000, p. 4).

In addition to widespread community dissatisfaction over English education, another factor to be considered is the student population. A

declining birthrate has meant that over the next few years there will be a great reduction in the number of students seeking university placement. Therefore, competition among universities for attracting students is becoming fierce. There is great pressure on university heads to provide competitive courses that are well evaluated by students. The two areas of most concern to educators are, firstly, to raise student satisfaction, and secondly, to raise students' levels of English proficiency.

The claims made by proponents of TBLT address both these areas. Firstly, there is a bulk of research in support of TBLT as a highly effective method of language learning. This research argues that language form is most effectively learned when learners are not focused on form, but rather focused on meaning (Krashen, 1982; Swain, 1985); and that learners need to actively use the target language for a real purpose in order to learn it (Montgomery & Eisenstein, 1985; Gass & Varonis, 1994). Secondly, as tasks are meaning-focused rather than form-focused, students become much more proficient at interactive communication (Nunan, 2004). Language drills and exercises invariably bring with them a certain amount of tedium that comes with repetition. Tasks engage the learner in the construction of meaning, which encourages self-expression and personalization, which in turn lifts motivation (Dörnyei, 2001).

The Language Teaching Profession

English educators at the university level can be divided into full-time lecturers and part-time teachers, with the part-timers taking the lion's share of classes. Part-time teachers are under great pressure to perform well in the classroom, especially in regard to teacher evaluation surveys. Most universities require students to complete an evaluation survey of their teacher and their classes during the final stages of the semester. These surveys often exert a strong influence over whether part-time teachers are offered more classes, or less. For

instance, at one university at least, a satisfaction score of 3.5 or lower (out of 5) results in the teacher's dismissal. While these surveys may spur teachers to improve their classes, time constraints greatly limit teachers' effectiveness in this regard. Most teachers, being employed on a part-time contract, have upward of 13 classes a week; while most full-time teachers are burdened with meetings, maintaining office-hours and many other duties. As Taguchi reports, lack of time for material development is a strong deterrent for implementing communicative tasks in the classroom (Taguchi, 2002).

The Learner

Concerning individual learners, one of the characteristics of Japanese university students that strikes many teachers is their great reluctance to participate in classroom communicative activities. A number of explanations exist for the cause of this problem, including shyness (Doyon, 2000), apathy (McVeigh, 2001), fear of negative evaluation (Brown, 2004) and fear of making mistakes (Kurihara, 2008). Others do not blame the students, but rather blame the educational process which instills a classroom culture that encourages passive, uncritical absorption of information. Hofstede (1986) classifies Japan as a 'collectivist' country, which means (among other traits) that students will only speak up in class when called upon by the teacher, there is an avoidance of conflict and confrontation, and acquiring certificates (even through illegal means, such as cheating) is more important than acquiring competence. This is a major hurdle which any practitioner of TBLT must overcome.

Implementing TBLT in the Japanese Classroom

The following recommendations are based on what has been learnt from research into TBLT and second language acquisition, combined with the above socio-cultural observations of the English as a foreign

language (EFL) situation in Japan.

Task Design

Focus on form

When designing tasks for the classroom, meaning is primary. However, within a task-based syllabus, there must be room for some focus on form. Research has revealed that a focus on form at some point within a TBLT course will likely result in learners attaining much higher levels of accuracy, than if form-focused activities are absent (Nassaji, 2000; Skehan, 1996; Long & Crookes, 1991; Fotos & Ellis, 1991).

Another, purely socio-cultural reason for focusing on form, is that Japanese university students have just completed 12 years of schooling in teacher-centered form-focused classrooms. English language classes have taught isolated skills, focusing on accuracy, usually by the grammar-translation method. A sudden switch to a TBLT syllabus may likely result in student anxiety and dissatisfaction, caused by discrepancies between teacher and student expectations (Matsuura, Chiba & Hilderbrandt, 2001; Burrows, 2008). A degree of cultural sensitivity and a willingness to engage in form-focused activities will reduce anxiety, promote teacher-student rapport, and thus lower the affective filter.

When implementing TBLT in the Japanese university classroom, therefore, teachers should maximize the chances of noticing during the pre-task phase. Preferably, this would be more implicit than a demonstration task or a 'useful language' box. During the task completion stage, students must have some attention directed towards form, so that task completion does not become the all-consuming focus. And once the task has been completed, there should be some time for reflection and consolidation, which could take the form of

practice exercises or reporting, in which the pedagogical aims of the task are explicitly revealed.

Task-types

Two-way exchange of information

A task with a two-way exchange of information is one where all participants have equal rights to speak, in order to achieve the task outcome. Long claims that "two-way tasks produce more negotiation work and more useful negotiation work than one-way tasks" (Long, 1989, p.13; cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 596). With a one-way task, only one participant controls the flow of information. Although one-way tasks seem to come a lot easier to Japanese students, two-way tasks appear to be more efficacious for language acquisition.

Planned tasks

Learners often produce increased levels of fluent, accurate and complex language when they have time to plan their output (Foster & Skehan, 1997: cited in Skehan, 1998, pp. 108-112). The effect of planning time is different according to the nature of the task, and a positive increase in one skill area sometimes means a decrease in another area. However, it can be argued that the overall effect of planning on task performance is positive. Especially in Japan, where students are very reluctant to produce language unless they are confident it is correct. When provided with time to think and construct language before engaging in a task, Japanese learners display greater confidence which results in greater achievement.

Closed tasks

An open task is one in which there is no predetermined solution, for example free conversation, debate and story telling. Closed tasks, on the other hand, require the participants to reach a single correct

solution, such as a 'spot the differences' game. Long notes "Closed tasks produce more negotiation work and more useful negotiation work than open tasks" (Long, 1989, p. 16; cited in Ellis, 1994, p. 598). Negotiation includes clarification requests, confirmation checks, self-expansion and greater sentence complexity.

Closed tasks are also well-suited to the Japanese classroom, where learners have a strong desire to know the 'correct' answer. With the less motivated students, an open task often results in the performance getting off-track and collapsing. The goal of reaching a 'correct answer' provides a strong incentive for students to continue the task until the outcome has been reached. (It should be mentioned, however, that open tasks provide an opportunity to practice language that closed tasks cannot, such as discourse strategies including turn-taking and topic selection, and therefore should not be altogether absent from the curriculum.)

The Role of the Teacher

Needless to say, the teacher plays a vital role in any task-based syllabus. The most exciting and engaging of tasks can quickly be sabotaged by indifferent (apathetic) students if mechanically or unimaginatively implemented by teachers. There are two core actions a teacher must take in order to elicit rich learner activity and promote the chances that actual learning takes place. The first is to motivate the learner, and the second is to interactionally support task performance (Van Avermaet, Colpin, Van Gorp, Bogaert, & Van den Branden, 2006).

Motivation is especially important in the Japanese university setting, where it is safer to assume that student motivation is low more often than it is high. Generally, students are reluctant to participate in a learner-centered communicative class, as required for effective task-based instruction (McVeigh, 2001; Burden, 2002; Brown, 2004;

Burrows, 2008; Kurihara, 2008; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). It is crucial therefore that teachers take great care in bringing the task to life during the introductory phase. This will likely not happen by adherence to the teacher's resource book for suggestions on how to introduce and implement the task. Every set of learners is different and so will have different goals for completing the task. For example, first year students majoring in fashion design will have different motivations compared to first year university students majoring in engineering. Even within classrooms, students' goals will vary substantially. As Vygotskian theory articulates, learners are adept at shaping the goals of any activity to suit their own purposes. Ultimately, it is the students themselves who will set goals for themselves at the start of the task. Teachers should ensure these goals motivate them to engage the task with maximal effort and in meaningful communication, as it is this that will promote their language development in the short and the long term (Van Avermaet et al., 2006, p. 178).

When completing in a task, learners are engaged in a complex interplay of mental operations which must be performed in an integrated manner. This will necessarily produce some obstacles or difficulties that need to be overcome. The teacher's role is to support the learner in order to overcome the linguistic and cognitive problems encountered during a task (Van Avermaet et al., 2006, p. 182). Vygotskian theory holds that learning takes place in the zone of proximal development, which is the gap between what a learner can accomplish without assistance, and what can be accomplished with aid from the teacher. Vygotsky uses the metaphor of a scaffold, where students are the building under construction and the teacher is the builder / architect. The scaffold is the support structure that the teacher provides to enable the student to complete tasks that are just beyond their range of competence. As learners grow in confidence and ability, these support structures are gradually removed (Sandy, 1999).

Conclusion

The benefits of task-based instruction have been strongly argued by recent research findings, resulting in a wide variety of task-based materials being used in EFL classes. However, without a proper understanding of the unique socio-cultural factors which shape the Japanese university classroom, such a teaching methodology may prove largely ineffective. A greater understanding of recent second language acquisition research into task-based instruction, combined with insights into the socio-cultural factors relating to English language education in Japan, will no doubt result in a number of practical strategies for the effective implementation of tasks with Japanese university students. It is hoped that the strategies presented in this paper will not only lead to higher levels of student language attainment, but also higher levels of student satisfaction and motivation.

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