

# Task-Based Language Teaching in a Low-Proficiency Japanese University Context

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## Abstract

In Japan, EFL educational objectives aim for the development of students' communicative competence. However, traditional ideologies and pedagogies, as well as the influence of test preparation, often hinder the achievement of this goal at the pre-tertiary level. As such, many students start university with a very low level of English proficiency. This paper will consider the application of task-based language teaching for low-proficiency students in Japanese university classrooms. The strengths of TBLT methodologies applied to this specific context are argued to be of benefit in developing some degree of communicative competency as well as increased confidence and motivation for students.

Key words : English as a foreign language, task-based language teaching (TBLT), communicative competence, low-proficiency students

## 1.0 Introduction

EFL teachers at the tertiary education level in Japan have faced a dilemma over the years : that even with six years of English language study, many students lack even an elementary degree of communicative competence. Many in Japan place the blame on widespread use of more traditional teaching methodologies, exam scores as the goal of language learning, student motivation, and social attitudes towards the classroom and what *learning* entails. However, while most are quick to acknowledge the problems, the system has proven resilient to change. Although affecting changes in language policy at the national level is undoubtedly a slow and deliberate process, there may be changes that EFL teachers, particularly those at the tertiary position, may be able to implement to attend to these issues on a more immediate level.

Most advocates of second language acquisition research agree that conventional language teaching methodologies that focus exclusively on *form* are not conducive towards developing effective communication skills. This disparity has led to the recent development of more comprehensive teaching methodologies that focus on *meaning* and providing opportunities for students to *use* the language. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is one such teaching approach that has gained much attention in recent years, receiving both criticism and praise in its theoretical groundings, practical application, and effectiveness.

This paper will critically evaluate the feasibility of implementing a task-based teaching methodology in a very specific context, but one that is very common across Japan : that of a required general English course for low-proficiency level Japanese university students. I will start with a review of the development and key principles of TBLT, then present contrasting arguments by both its supporters and critics. After this, I will provide a generalized description of the low-proficiency English university classroom context that is common throughout Japan, presenting the various related factors of existing teaching and learning beliefs, socio-cultural context, motivation, and learning goals. Having considered these elements, I will then appraise the practicality of implementing TBLT and its effectiveness in promoting learners' communicative competence within a low-proficiency university EFL teaching context. Within this frame of reference, I will examine both the anticipated advantages and difficulties in the realization of this teaching approach.

## 2.0 Second Language Acquisition, Communicative Language Teaching, and Task-Based Language Teaching

Over the past three decades, second language acquisition (SLA) research has allowed teachers and researchers to understand more about how learners *learn to use* languages. Most notable perhaps was a set of hypotheses presented by Stephen Krashen that suggest 1.) communicative competence is acquired subconsciously, 2.) conscious learning in itself does not produce language, and 3.) language is 'acquired' when learners can understand input that is slightly beyond their current ability (Krashen, 1981 in Nunan, 2004 : 77-79). Such research coincided with growing concerns over the efficacy of traditional language teaching techniques at the time, such as the grammar-translation and audiolingual methods. The implications for language teaching meant a shift to a focus on meaning and a methodology of subconscious learning through genuinely communicative tasks.

With this developing insight into second language acquisition, and the general acceptance of the inadequacies of traditional teaching methodologies in effectively enabling students' communicative competence, communicative language teaching (CLT) emerged (see Canale and Swain, 1980 ; Savignon, 1991). CLT is contingent on developing communicative competence through authentic language activities that focus on fluency rather than accuracy, using all modes of language, and where successful communication of meaning is the goal. CLT as a learner-centered approach seeks to address the issue of learners' communicative competency through a 'learn by doing' philosophy. Hedge states that such communicative language ability is comprised of five major competences that teachers must constantly consider in CLT. These are highlighted in Table 1 below.

In actual classroom application, CLT can range anywhere from a 'strong' approach where students 'use English to learn it', to a 'weak' approach where learners are merely provided activities that allow 'opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes' within a more general language program (Howatt in Richards and Rodgers, 1986 : 66). However, the issue with CLT is that the 'weak' approach has become the more common interpretation, as it is seen as more compatible with preexisting teaching dogma and established teacher and learner styles which tend not to prioritize communicative abilities. This, in addition to a continued heavy reliance of PPP models in the CLT classroom which forces

Table 1 Five competencies for communicative language ability  
(adopted from Hedge, 2000 : 46-55)

Linguistic competence	Knowledge of the language and rules
Pragmatic competence	Use of the language for communicative goals
Discourse competence	Ability to create and understand coherent discourse
Strategic competence	Communicative strategies to help compensate for lack of adequate L2 knowledge
Fluency	Proficiency in combining the respective units of the L2 with certainty and promptness

learners back to focus on form (Willis, 2009 : 3), has diverted many modern CLT applications away from the very SLA principles by which they were developed.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an evolution of the communicative language approach, as it emphasizes that meaningful communication is not only a primary goal of, but also *the means to*, language learning. TBLT sets itself apart from CLT in that the task itself is pivotal to, and inseparable from, the learning methodology, with focus on meaning coming before any focus on form. However, a universal understanding of a pedagogical *task* has proven illusive, as the varied interpretations are often the source of criticism and improper implementation of the TBLT approach. Ellis defines a task as ‘a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed’ (2003 : 16). Such tasks should not prescribe the language to be used, although they may be designed in such a way as to lead learners to use specific forms. Hence, students should rely on their pre-existing knowledge of language, allowing the focus of the task to be on meanings, and in this sense, approximate how language is used in the real world.

TBLT presents language through a focus on meaning by means of communicative tasks. Willis points out that in language acquisition ‘what is ‘taught’ is often not learnt, and learners often ‘learn’ things which have not been taught at all’ (2003 : 1). Traditional teaching methods and the PPP model prescribe the specific language forms which are to be practiced and produced in a ‘communicative’ activity. In such classrooms, the degree of success is based on how accurately the learner can replicate these prescribed forms and the result serves as an assessment of ‘learning’ the language. Conversely, in the TBLT classroom, in working through tasks, learners must tap into their available pool of language to navigate their way towards the task’s goal, negotiating meaning with others in student pairs or groups along the way. In the task process, language forms that may be necessary to complete the task become more evident, which provides opportunities for the learning of new language. SLA research argues that new language forms are best learned when there is a ‘communicative need’. However, successful negotiation of meanings within genuine communication is in itself the immediate task goal, regardless of language form or accuracy of language use.

TBLT’s approach to language learning is a radical departure from traditional teaching methods. Lightbown and Spada suggest traditional and TBLT methodologies could be contrasted as ‘get it right from the beginning’ and ‘get it right in the end’ approaches (in Willis, 2007 : 30-32). Grounds for the efficacy of the ‘getting it right in the end’ TBLT process over traditional methodologies are exhibited

in SLA research : that language is not typically acquired in the ‘logical order’ that it is often presented in. SLA contends that learners learn new language in a much less systematic and deliberate process. TBLT aims to promote new language acquisition by creating a cognitive need to learn the language, facilitated by means of communicative tasks. Willis points out that if learners ‘do not have the confidence and fluency to make the most of their limited language, they will have gained very little from their course of study’ (2007 : 31). It seems that if our goal as teachers is to help students develop communicative competence, we should be employing methods that focus on helping them efficiently use what language they do know.

With such a strongly advocated focus on meaning, and a methodology that does not work to control student’s language, TBLT often is misunderstood as an approach which ignores or glosses over form. It may be easy to see how this could be the case, as TBLT stresses fluency over accuracy, and proposes a learning system that is difficult to evaluate by the more traditional means of student’s ‘linear progress’. However, the place for form within the TBLT process occurs after the focus on meaning.

In a TBLT lesson, it is typical to hold a *sequence* of related tasks, each preparing learners for the following task and becoming a cumulation of all the tasks before it. Within each task, Skehan (1998 : 137–151) identifies three distinct phases : the pre-task phase, the task, and a post-task phase. The pre-task phase may consist of activities that introduce the language, to ‘activate’ language within the learner that may be useful for the task. This helps learners to think about the task requirements, and to encourage them to attempt to construct new language forms to more accurately convey what they wish to express.

As primacy of meaning is key in the task itself, there is no explicit focus on form in the pre-task or main task phases. The post-task phase is where the teacher may focus learners’ attention to form. By doing so at this stage, TBLT maintains a focus on the communicative meaning of *what* is said, while afterwards, makes learners aware of *how* it is said with specific forms that may be helpful in communicating their thoughts more accurately. Ellis (2009 : 223) points out that there are both ‘unfocused’ and ‘focused’ tasks, with the latter being designed to procure a particular grammar point or linguistic feature. Ellis also highlights that task-based activities can even exist alongside more traditional grammar-focused teaching approaches (2009 : 221). Such variations within TBLT provide for a more form-based direction.

The argument against focusing first on form to be later practiced in a ‘communicative activity’, such as in PPP, is that learners would be actively concentrating on the prescribed forms to the extent that language becomes unnaturally stilted, removing focus away from *what* is said and fixating on *how* it is said. Conversely, by focusing on form at the end of a task sequence, it provides genuine communicative motivation for students to notice new forms and language that may help them to better express themselves. Willis contends that SLA research shows that ‘learners need to engage with meaning if they are to develop a grammatical system’ (2009 : 5), further devaluing the language learning efficacy of traditional approaches.

Being such a radical departure from traditional language teaching methodology, TBLT is not without its opponents. Michal Swan is one of the more notable critics of TBLT, although he does admit that TBLT can be an effective method in allowing learners to more fully actualize their current language knowledge. However, in this he argues that TBLT favors the development of ‘what is already known at

the expense of the efficient teaching of new language' (Swan, 2005 : 378). Swan reflects many traditional language teachers' fears of being relegated to a 'facilitator' role as well as losing control over students' learning processes ; however it would seem that SLA research into what it means to actually *learn* a language could be used as a defense here. Swan also criticizes the validity of such SLA research, convinced that the very tenets of TBLT are themselves unfounded in empirical evidence. Swan's opinion is that, with limited classroom time and resources, teachers' time is best spent on 'concentrated work leading to the mastery of a limited range of high-priority language elements' (2005 : 398).

Among such criticisms, there seems to be a common call for a 'hybrid' approach that allows for the retention of some of the traditional language teaching methodologies alongside the more communicative tasks of TBLT. Sato (2009), Burrows (2008), and Ellis (2009) all make arguments about the incompatibility of a 'strong' approach to TBLT in Asian, and specifically, Japanese contexts ; yet all three comment that the strengths of TBLT could be realized in some sort of middle ground with existing methodologies. Littlewood provides one such response to this request with his 'five category framework' (2007 : 247), which offers a range of activity types : non-communicative learning, pre-communicative, communicative, structured communication, and authentic communication. Such a progressive selection of activities and tasks provides more traditionally-oriented teachers with the means to gradually work their way into a stronger TBLT approach. As long as care in design ensures that task focus remains on meaning, hybrid approaches hold appeal as they allow much variety and flexibility for teachers in adapting TBLT to their own context. Willis and Willis (2009 : 4) provide a number of criteria that help to evaluate the level of 'meaningfulness' of a task-based activity in TBLT :

1. Does it engage the learner interest ?
2. Is there a primary focus on meaning ?
3. Is success measured in terms of non-linguistic outcome rather than accurate use of language forms ?
4. Does it relate to real-world activities ?

In the following sections, I will look at the state of EFL in Japan as it relates to a low-proficiency university teaching context. I will also consider how receptive such conditions may be to the implementation of TBLT in this specific situation.

### **3.0 Factors of a Low-Proficiency Japanese University EFL Context**

In this section, I will subjectively consider the application and benefits of a TBLT approach for university students with a low-proficiency in English. As with most other Japanese university students, learners have already had six or more years of formal classroom English education in junior high and high school. Up through secondary school, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) sets national foreign language education policy :

To develop students' practical communication abilities such as understanding information and

the speaker's or writer's intentions, and expressing their own ideas, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages. (MEXT, 2011)

MEXT specifically states that 'students should be engaged in activities that lead them to exchange their thoughts and feelings by actually using the English language' (Sato, 2010 : 190). However, in reality, despite the officially stated goal of developing students' practical communicative competence, English education at Japanese secondary schools largely functions to condition students to be able to pass examinations where 'practical communicative abilities are rarely measured' (Sato 2009 : 11, see also Kikuchi and Sakai, 2009 : 199).

This lends itself to a situation where most Japanese students enter university with a supposedly wide range of lexico-grammatical knowledge, but little or no competence in using it communicatively. Most educators and students are well aware of this discrepancy despite continuous efforts to foster greater communicative English language abilities before entering university. Educators and students have been raised on a teacher-centered system of traditional grammar-translation and PPP approaches. Their beliefs are deeply ingrained with the value that language learning is a teacher-controlled environment, measured in the amount and accuracy of individual specified forms one can successfully apply to examination questions.

Such teaching styles appear to be typical of the Asian classroom hierarchy where it is understood that 'teachers are supposed to have authority over students' (Sato, 2009 : 12) and 'the teacher's knowledge is bestowed to the student, while (they) passively (receive it)' (Burrows, 2008 : 17). This creates a situation where few students have the learning behaviors, motivation, need, or classroom opportunities to actively develop communicative competence through the means prescribed by TBLT. In fact, a survey study by Kikuchi and Saki (2009 : 198) contends that this very learning environment of non-communicative methods and the over-emphasized goal of examinations in Japan actually leads many students to a state of *demotivation* in language learning classrooms.

With such obstacles, many EFL educators in the Japanese context such as Burrows (2008) and Sato (2009) argue that TBLT, at least in its 'strong form', is 'not only unrealistic, but also unreasonable' (Burrows, 2008 : 18). However, accepting SLA findings, is it any longer reasonable to expect the advancement of learner's communicative competence without changes to current teaching methodology and learner attitudes ?

Even given the argument of the inflexibility of Asian teaching contexts, in particular the Japanese system, to accommodate TBLT, it remains that language policy in these countries calls for communicative competence in their learners. These are needs which are not being met under the traditional teaching schemes that remain widespread in Asia today. A study by Nunan shows that even as early as 2002, mainland China, Hong Kong, Korea, Malaysia, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Japan all subscribed to 'principles of CLT, and in a number of them TBLT is the central pillar of government rhetoric' (2003 : 606). As recent as 2007, Nunan continued to report that within East Asia, 'national policies and syllabuses have moved increasingly towards various versions of...TBLT' (in Littlewood, 2007 : 243). Hence, despite the challenges and opposition, as far as the official line, it seems that finding a way to implement TBLT is

less of an option for teachers in these regions, and more of a professional obligation.

With these considerations and despite the argued incompatibility of TBLT within Asian contexts, there exist many reports of successful TBLT programs in these same countries (see McDonough and Chaikitmongkol, 2007 for TBLT in Thailand), including reports from Japanese university classrooms. Moser (in Edwards and Willis, 2005) describes an effective use of TBLT for his non-English major class at Osaka University. Beglar and Hunt (in Richards and Renandya, 2002) also report a well-received task-based student-generated project for a large group of 340 Japanese university students. Given these successes, I am of the opinion that TBLT can similarly be successfully implemented in low-proficiency university English classrooms.

#### **4.0 Discussion — The Feasibility of TBLT in Low-Proficiency University EFL Contexts**

The low-proficiency EFL teaching context considered here would be similar to that reported in Moser's study : where all students are required to take the course as part of the minimum general foreign language curriculum requirements set by the university. A common scenario at Japanese universities, classes typically meet for one 90-minute period every week. The vast majority of students would be considered 'false-beginners' with little communicative competence, and with little intrinsic motivation.

Very few students in this context anticipate continuing on to a situation where they are required to need English in their lives, and as such, only a small handful aspire to take typical standardized university-level English tests such as the Eiken or TOEIC, let alone the TOEFL. Additionally, most students regard any required university English classes as likely the last time they will ever be in an EFL classroom.

At first glance, the existing factors of socio-cultural educational context, motivation, and learning goals all appear to lend to a situation which would be particularly resistant to a learner-centered TBLT approach. Indeed, EFL teachers in similar positions such as Burrows (2008) and Sato (2009) have made claims about the incompatibility of TBLT in Japanese contexts for many of these very reasons. In this section, I will argue that some of these factors may actually be conducive for a TBLT approach in this particular context.

Despite the difficulties in implementing a TBLT approach in many Japanese teaching contexts, I maintain that TBLT would be ideal for a low-proficiency university English course as described above. I also believe that TBLT, effectively implemented in such a situation, would prove beneficial in enabling students to communicate more effectively in English. As the vast majority of Japanese university students are a homogeneous group, and as Japanese secondary education tends to be standardized towards university entrance examinations requirements, teachers in this context can make fairly accurate evaluations as to what language their students have previously studied. This would be particularly advantageous in effective task planning. Furthermore, beyond these general points, there are a number of more practical factors as to why TBLT would be ideal in this context.

Learner motivation is a major factor which TBLT has been shown to have a positive effect on. Many low-proficiency university students in Japan tend to have little intrinsic or instrumental motivation,



and some even have little extrinsic motivation beyond passing the course. TBLT tasks are claimed to provide motivation in themselves, as interesting task topics that engage the learner are inherently motivating. This would be ideal for such students, as many are apathetic to the generic themes presented by general study textbooks similar to those they have used at the junior high and high school levels. Motivation can be further increased by allowing students to choose the topics they wish to pursue, making drive for task completion much more genuine and personal. In their own implementation of TBLT tasks at Japanese universities, Moser reports students showing ‘great interest’ in the tasks (2005 : 81), and Beglar and Hunt state that tasks were ‘well-received by the majority of learners’ who found them ‘rewarding, intrinsically interesting, and educationally beneficial’ (2002 : 104). Even Sato, a critic of TBLT in the Japanese context, admits ‘by being provided with opportunities to actually use the language, students are motivated to talk in English’ and that it ‘improves student’s positive attitude for communication’ (2010 : 198). Also, with the understanding that grammatical accuracy is not the focus of most tasks, students will likely be less reserved in producing language more spontaneously.

Having been fostered on a system of exam-based language learning goals and non-communicative, passive learning styles, low-proficiency students have little ability in communication skills. As such, it may be difficult for them to jump into tasks that require large amounts of spoken interaction. Fortunately, TBLT tasks can be adapted in a variety of ways to adapt to students’ initial abilities and learning needs, using any of the four skills : reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Moser reported a similar concern with his own Japanese students ; where he found it particularly time-consuming to attempt tasks orally. He successfully adapted tasks so that written output was used (Moser, 2005 : 80). Furthermore, in situations where exposure to spoken English is limited to classroom exchanges, tasks can be alternately designed to provide an abundance of varied input.

Although a new teaching methodology will likely be initially intimidating for low-proficiency students, the pair- and group-oriented task style of TBLT provide a learning style quite familiar in Japanese classrooms. Pre-tasks and main tasks that require group facilitation and utilize peers to check language can act as a ‘spring-board’ into the more singular duties in tasks. In particular, post-tasks that focus on form provide chances for each individual student to notice forms that they are lacking in order to express themselves more accurately. This should encourage and help such students to develop more independent and autonomous study skills. Again, Moser remarks that his own TBLT course helped students to realize the ‘empowering potential of TBLT’ and ‘showed them that they are just as responsible for their learning as (he was)’ (2005 : 84). Beglar and Hunt also reported positive motivation in students as a result of peer-initiated topic selection which carried through to the project’s conclusion (2002 : 100). Having developed even a small degree of autonomy in language study should prove an invaluable skill for such students even beyond the university general English class.

Despite this list of anticipated benefits of a TBLT approach in such teaching contexts, it would be irresponsible not to heed the experiences of those that have come before, as well as consider the arguments of critics of TBLT in East Asian contexts. One major issue that I have mentioned, even in adapting a weak form of TBLT, would be in the immediate disparity between the more active, autonomous learner position in TBLT compared to the more passive traditional classroom that students are likely used to. In order to help facilitate students’ acceptance of and position in this new teaching methodol-



ogy, it would be advisable to also make them aware of the TBLT approach and its pedagogical benefits, as well as discuss applicable learner strategies with them. This same progressive stance is also proposed by many others considering TBLT in Asian contexts, including Burrows (2008 : 16), Moser (2007, in Willis and Willis), and Ellis (2009 : 241).

Apart from all of the logical rationale behind why a TBLT approach *could* work in low-proficiency teaching contexts, perhaps the most important reason for why teachers *should* do so would be for the students themselves. Giving students the chance to develop even a minimal amount of communicative competence is arguably worth far more than merely adding to their existing latent knowledge of lexico-grammatical items. Such an achievement would presumably allow them to leave university with at least a small amount of confidence in their ability to communicate in English more effectively, without the stigmatizing fear of constantly needing to be grammatically accurate. It may even inspire a few students to continue their language studies, with a new-found understanding of what language learning can be, and with developed skills in being more autonomous learners.

## 5.0 Conclusion-To TBLT or not to TBLT ?

What does it mean to *learn* a language and what is the *goal* of language learning ? It seems that EFL educators would be able to achieve at least some sort of consensus on the answers, given the insights of modern SLA research and stated goals of English education by governing education ministries. However, in reality the means to language learning often seem to be inherently opposed to the ends. This holds true in Japan, where traditional attitudes of both teachers and students towards education and continued reliance on more ‘established’ methods are resistant to change despite stated EFL goals of communicative ability. As this paper has argued, regardless of the challenges in incorporating a TBLT approach in many Japanese EFL contexts, there are certain stages along students’ EFL learning paths where TBLT not only seems possible, but actually ideal given the students’ learning situation.

With the seemingly insurmountable odds in the Japanese educational system, it is understandable that many choose to throw in the towel and stick to traditional teaching approaches. Indeed, for many EFL teachers, there may not even be a choice in teaching methodology. However, if TBLT were to prove successful at increasing learners’ effective communication skills at some stage in the Japanese education system, it could become a catalyst for change at all levels of EFL teaching. As Willis states, teachers, learners, and parents ‘will welcome change if it can be shown to produce results’ (2009 : 6). Despite the contextual challenges of teaching in Japan, if communicative competence is indeed a goal for EFL teachers and learners, then truly all involved must reconsider what it means to *learn* a language and adapt to teaching approaches that enable such learning.

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