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The Effectiveness of Task Based Language Teaching Versus Traditional Second Language Acquisition Teaching Methods

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Introduction

This paper will examine data from the body of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) research to determine if TBLT methods can be as effective in bolstering learners' assessable language skills as traditional grammar-translation methods. Further, it will explore the results of experiments that utilized TBLT to promote Second-Language Acquisition (SLA) and will recommend a means of implementing TBLT into a Japanese university curriculum. The ultimate hope is that SLA educators considering this research will eventually formulate their own successful TBLT methods based on "real-world" considerations and other communicative needs instead of adopting an approach that seeks to impart the target language for its own sake. For decades, countless learners (and teachers alike) in Japan have engaged in traditional textbook-based styles of SLA designed only to prepare students for standardized language tests; such learners have not only been easily bored, but have also often lost any willingness to communicate in the target language by virtue of a problematic approach.

In contrast, TBLT, according to the Cambridge University Press ("What is Task-Based Language Teaching," 2016), is a pedagogical concept informed by SLA research and characterized by (a) a needs-based approach, (b) an interactive learning-

communication format, and (c) involvement of authentic texts, among other key factors linking principles to practice. SLA researchers usually define any activity performed by students in an SLA classroom as a "task." Yet, the core idea behind TBLT is that certain activities—namely, those tasks that concentrate on content—can aid in developing second-language proficiency. Ideally, these tasks would be completed in a practical, effective, and engaging way, allowing learners to become competent in a target language almost incidentally through the delivery of target-language content based on practical and real-world needs.

According to Calvert and Sheen (2015), TBLT has its roots in a theoretical learning framework developed by behaviorist Kurt Lewin. In the 1940s, Lewin became an early proponent of the "task-based" teaching ideology. Lewin explored human learning through the lens of "problem identification," ultimately proposing that "action research" be employed with interjections of "reflective observation" to solve the problems identified (p. 227). Though there is no direct connection between Lewin's ideas and SLA per se, the precedent and the parallels are clear. The inability of a learner to communicate in or understand a second language is "the problem." The "task" (delivered in the second language) constitutes the "action research," and the

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learner ultimately having the confidence to communicate in the second language is the “reflective observation” —thereby solving the problem.

Literature Review: TBLT in the Classroom

In 2014, O’Connell conducted an examination of TBLT in the context of an English as a Second Language (ESL) community class attended by new arrivals from Latin America in a Mid-Atlantic state. The course employed materials responding to the real-world needs of dealing with a police traffic stop. The students’ task was to communicate effectively with the police officers, thereby ensuring their safety in a potentially dangerous situation. Instead of assigning textbook dialogue reading, grammar drills, and vocabulary practice, the classroom instructor repeatedly peppered the students with authentic police inquiries: requesting documentation, querying immigration status, and issuing other police commands, especially those concerning physical movements. O’Connell assumed this circumstance to be a practical, real-world need for this particular population. Extrapolating from that assumption, O’Connell subsequently expanded the ESL lessons to include additional needs such as taking official phone calls, understanding physicians, discussing problems with their children’s teachers, deciphering prescription drug labels, and reading household instructions. The conclusion was that this approach fostered an attentive, enthusiastic classroom learner who was more motivated to learn because the communication tasks were both relevant and consequential.

Ciubăncan (2013) also showed positive results with the use of TBLT in a language classroom—in this case, a Japanese-language classroom in Romania. Ciubăncan noted in her background investigation that as early as the 18th century, the SLA research

literature lamented that traditional grammar-translation methods largely ignored content. She further discovered that 21st-century methods of second language instruction in Romania did the same thing, fostering predictably poor proficiency results from Romanian students studying Japanese. Given the dearth and inadequacy of practical, content-based material in Romania Ciubăncan observed that TBLT approaches, utilizing real-life situations and delivering all instructional content in Japanese (“immersion-style”), was far more effective in promoting language skill acquisition than traditional techniques. Ciubăncan concluded that when instructional tasks were geared to students’ needs, interests, and motivations, Japanese-language proficiency demonstrably improved.

In another example, Jarvis (2015) discussed the impact of mobile devices on classroom SLA and concluded that electronic communications devices are a natural way to implement TBLT methods. Due to the ubiquitous nature of such devices, Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has become increasingly popular among innovative language teachers. MALL, the researcher contends, is inherently needs based, so it can serve as an especially practical and effective force in designing task-based teaching curriculums.

To that end, Promnitz-Hayashi (2011) carried out a study on the effects of social networking on language instruction for 27 Japanese university students with a TOEFL range of 300-500. She based her research on the observation that students were already intrinsically motivated to use social networking in their native language, motivation that might easily carry over into the SLA classroom. The study demonstrated that the introduction of Twitter and Facebook in classroom settings did indeed increase students’ enjoyment and intrinsic motivation. Promnitz-Hayashi first introduced social

networking activities as an optional exercise (thus students were extrinsically motivated) , but the students “ ...soon transformed into intrinsically motivated as all 27 students in the class chose to participate...” (p. 314). Promnitz-Hayashi observed that introverted students became more motivated and more talkative during such activities. She also noticed that, “students began to express more opinions and give extended reasoning in not only their face-to-face interactions, but also in their written class work” (p. 315). Promnitz-Hayashi determined that it was unclear whether social networking activities in isolation were responsible for the observed improvements, noting that the students’ intrinsic motivation could have played a role. Nevertheless, she concluded that these “kinds of opportunities and environments may create conditions for facilitating the development of learner autonomy” (p. 315) —a key precept in Lewin’s framework.

Literature Review: TBLT in the Workplace

Calvert and Sheen (2015) conducted TBLT research in the form of a practical SLA project, examining the results of an occupational task-based English course for hospitality workers. Over a ten-week period, about a dozen Nepalese, Ethiopian, and Iranian refugees participated in the project. Though participants’ educational experiences in their native countries varied widely, their SLA “tasks” — including various hospitality undertakings such as food service, housekeeping, maintenance, and janitorial duties—did not. The study focused on students’ ability to communicate and describe finished versus unfinished jobs. Essentially, the language-teaching component of the experiment was to deliver, through on-the-job training, instruction on how to perform the aforementioned duties in English. Though many task adjustments, changes, and modifications were made along the way, students’

self-assessments reported markedly improved communicative proficiency and confidence in using English. The study concludes with techniques that educators can use to identify problems and modify tasks in order to create their own TBLT system for either the workplace or the classroom.

In another workplace SLA study, Nielson and González-Lloret (2015) concluded that TBLT methods are particularly effective for native English speakers seeking to increase their Spanish proficiency. Nielson and González-Lloret explored TBLT methods in three empirical studies: (1) a comparative oral proficiency study, (2) an evaluation of overall improvements resulting from TBLT, and (3) a qualitative measurement of students’ satisfaction with their language course. The U.S. Border Patrol Academy (BPA) served as the backdrop for the study, which yielded positive results, confirming that the task-based format helped to better prepare trainees for crucial completion of job-related duties while simultaneously improving overall Spanish-language proficiency (Nielson and González-Lloret, 2015). The researchers viewed the BPA as an ideal setting for a TBLT study because, though agents are not required to be proficient in Spanish in order to gain their positions, they are nevertheless required while on duty to communicate in Spanish with people who have no understanding of English. As such, as Nielson and González-Lloret point out, “the U.S. Border Patrol requires all of its agents-in-training to complete a rigorous Spanish-language program” (p. 6). Proficiency here has real-world benefits: fluency complements the agents’ ability to solve immigration problems, help abandoned immigrants, tend to the injured, and defuse potential international incidents.

In their study, Nielson and González-Lloret (2015) first identified BPA recruits with the greatest need

for Spanish-language proficiency and then divided them into a control group that studied using traditional grammar-translation methods and a test group that employed TBLT techniques. Nielson and González-Lloret compared the qualitative data from each group and determined that both courses were successful in improving Spanish-language competence. Students in the task-based course, however, were able to “outperform students in the grammar-based course in terms of oral accuracy, fluency, and complexity, while performing at an equivalent level in grammatical accuracy” (p. 25). Of particular note was the task-based group’s equivalence in grammatical accuracy, which demonstrated to the researchers that TBLT techniques could be effective not only for enhancing real-world speaking and listening skills, but also for preparing students for grammar-intensive standardized language examinations. Even though this study was conducted in the workplace, their results suggested that TBLT pedagogical methods offer a promising framework for higher education learning environments as well.

Literature Review: TBLT: Monitoring, Motivation Psychology, and Age Group Differences

On the other hand, not all research wholeheartedly praises TBLT methodology for SLA. Skehan, Xiaoyue, Qian, and Wang (2012), for example, determined that the planning, familiarity and expectations of tasks were of greater importance in assessing communicative results than the performance of the tasks alone. Moreover, Skehan et al. suggested that focusing on the task itself was insufficient to “parallel first-language acquisition” (p. 171). The study built a framework for task-based research that considered the difficulty, characteristics, and conditions of the tasks and concluded that within that framework, it was

precisely these elements, along with repetitive monitoring, that furthered language acquisition—and, crucially, not the actual tasks involved. In other words, without explicitly mentioning motivation, Skehan et al. inferred that while some students may have been motivated to participate in fun, real-world, or easygoing tasks, students who engaged in monitored rote memorization and repetition of the materials achieved more quantifiable target-language accuracy. In fact, their research concluded that monitoring assumes “greater importance” in advanced language skills than “normal communication” (p. 182).

Ushioda (2010), meanwhile, investigated motivational approaches to SLA. Such approaches have evolved greatly over the last 40 years, so much so that SLA motivational research results have “endured an odd, marginalized position” (p. 6). Interested in finding and identifying the gaps in SLA motivational research, Ushioda delved into the psychological areas of the SLA literature and determined that learners’ social identity, intergroup dynamics, and attitudes were more important components of language acquisition than teaching methodologies, whether task-based or not. Ushioda (2010) also found that focusing upon cognitive motivational theories (such as TBLT) alone merely opened up an incomplete, ongoing, and irresolvable debate among SLA researchers. The essential takeaway from Ushioda’s study is the need to develop new, workable research designs in order to better understand particular teaching methodologies: for example, Ushioda notes the importance of differentiating among TBLT principles and practices with respect to age groups, academic levels, cultural environments, and time frames.

Yamamoto and Marchesseau (2014) came to similar conclusions concerning TBLT and age group

differences, inferring that TBLT was more suitable for elementary students. While studying a Japanese elementary school over a two-month period, they divided students into two groups. One group was given task-based lessons and the other, the control group, was given traditional textbook-based classes. Yamamoto and Marchesseau (2014) revealed that the task-based participants reported a higher level of enjoyment and were more communicative than control group pupils. This difference, they surmised, was perhaps “not because of the task necessarily, but because of the content itself and its connection with students’ life outside of English class” (p. 25). They went on to argue that TBLT methods are entirely appropriate for elementary-aged students, but the tasks must be “deliberate and focused” (p. 25).

Conclusion

This paper only canvassed a small sample of academic studies concerning TBLT, yet it is clear even from this sample size that TBLT can be an effective methodology for teaching a second language. For, example, Calvert and Sheen (2015) demonstrated that Kurt Lewin, who devoted his life’s work to the study of behaviorism and motivation as they related to learning, was a staunch proponent of “action research” or “tasked-based” teaching. Kolb (1984) summarized Lewin’s findings as follows: “... learning is best facilitated in an environment where there is dialectic tension and conflict between immediate, concrete experience and analytic detachment...” (p. 10). This discovery meshes well with empirical evidence. Any professional SLA teacher knows that it is students’ motivation—whether intrinsic or extrinsic—as well as their interest and attitude that will determine their success in communicating in the target language. Textbook study, rote memorization, and grammar-translation methods could certainly be interpreted as

“analytic detachment,” and SLA educators in Japan have lamented their ineffectiveness for decades.

In all the TBLT classroom and workplace studies examined in this paper, the researchers concluded that TBLT methods resulted in improved proficiency, output, and motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic. Extrinsically, students in the workplace improved their target-language communication skills in order to better carry out the functions of daily life, feel safe in potentially threatening situations, deal with officials, and perform adequately on the job. Intrinsically, classroom students improved due to their enjoyment in pursuing activities they already enjoyed in their native language—using social media being the prime example.

Despite the findings of Skehan et al. (2012) suggesting that monitoring and task elements are important for the development of accuracy in the target language, Nielson and González-Lloret (2015) concluded that TBLT techniques produced accuracy just as well as grammar-translation methods. Furthermore, Nielson and González-Lloret (2015) contended that TBLT was well suited for higher education, notwithstanding Yamamoto and Marchesseau’s (2014) observations on the appropriateness of TBLT for elementary-age students. Ushioda’s (2010) research concluded that focusing on TBLT (or any cognitive motivational teaching theory) may be unproductive simply because there is too much disagreement and little consensus on the importance and impact of motivation in the SLA classroom. Further, Ushioda contends that socio-psychological factors of the learner outweigh the importance of specific teaching methodologies with respect to SLA.

Nevertheless, motivation, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, remains a powerful and significant learning

tool. As shown in the body of scholarly research, SLA students engaged in TBLT methods are not only more motivated to learn a second language than students taught with traditional techniques, but they also often produce better communicative results and, at minimum, equivalent grammatical retention outcomes.

Given these findings, the creation of TBLT-based English courses at Japanese universities could harness students' intrinsic motivation, a previously untapped resource. Such courses could lead to both higher communicative proficiency and greater linguistic skill among students, not to mention the potential for improved TOEFL/TOEIC scores.

Recommendation

Extracurricular activities could help to realize the language-learning goals of Japanese university SLA curriculums. University students in Japan are traditionally very dedicated to and enthusiastic about their chosen extracurricular activities—thus, they are intrinsically motivated to spend a great deal of time engaged in them. Japanese universities are noted for offering a vast array of sports and cultural clubs on campuses.

Therefore, integrating club activities with a TBLT-based English courses could capitalize on these preexisting interests: students' main "tasks" would be to comprehend instructions (delivered in English) in their preferred activity and to communicate about that activity, also in English. These courses could foster even greater proficiency and skill than traditional classes because students would already be sufficiently motivated to learn. The motivation aspect, one of the most difficult dynamics to foster in any classroom, would be automatically built into the learning environment.

A Japanese university offering a required freshman course titled "English 1: Karate in English" —as opposed to "English 1: TOEFL Preparation"—might elicit a shriek from an adherent of traditional grammar-translation models. Nevertheless, research has indicated that while some monitoring and memorization work is necessary, both types of courses can be at least equally effective. TBLT methods operating within the sphere of extracurricular activity instruction thus have the potential to enable students to improve their English skills without resorting to needlessly boring exercises in rote memorization. Additionally, such methods would afford students the opportunity to increase their English skills without concentrated textbook study, a practice that feels especially archaic in this digital age.

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