

An Investigation of Task-based Language Teaching in Elementary School

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Abstract

Task-based Language Teaching has been popular for a number of years in English as a second or foreign language programs. This research investigates the effectiveness of tasks in elementary school Foreign Language Activities classes in Japan. First, classes were observed over a two-month period to investigate how often, and how tasks are employed currently in the elementary school setting. Then, the researchers taught two different groups of students, administering tasks to an experimental group and a non-task-based lesson to a control group to observe students' attitudes towards Task-based Language Teaching. Observing English classes, it was found that tasks are frequently employed by teachers and are well-received by students. When the researchers gave a task-based lesson as compared to a non-task-based lesson, however, the results were mixed.

(Keywords: TBLT, Foreign Language Education, CLT)

1. Background

1.1 Foreign Language Activities

In 2011, Foreign Language Activities (FLA) was introduced as a “subject area” in Japanese elementary schools for fifth and sixth grade (MEXT, 2008). The goals of FLA are to ignite students' interest in English through experiencing communication in the language (MEXT, 2009). The overall objective is stated to be:

To form the foundation of pupils' communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a

positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages.

Although the Course of Study is deliberately written in vague terms to encourage teacher interpretation and maintain flexibility, the importance of oral communication recurs numerous times throughout the document. In fact, “communication” or a derivative of the word occurs 22 times in the three to four page document. This indicates that some form of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) would be appropriate in the elementary school setting. “Communication” is indeed the single most salient goal for elementary school students.

1.2 Task-based Language Teaching

CLT is sometimes misunderstood. It is not a “method”, as some might believe, but a broad philosophical approach towards language teaching, resting on the belief that meaning-focused “communication” helps to facilitate language acquisition (Murray, 2010). One of the most common ways of realizing this philosophy is through Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) (Larson-Freeman et. al, 2011; Richards et. al. 2001; Ellis, 2003). Particularly popular in recent times, TBLT is one of the cornerstones of modern CLT and is, therefore, the focus of this study. In this section, tasks and TBLT are discussed in and outside Japan. From the various definitions of task, provided by different researchers, a working definition was then distilled for the purpose of this study.

A task can be defined in broad or narrow terms. Willis (1996), for example defines a task simply as being “a classroom undertaking where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose”(p. 173). Other researchers provide more specific definitions. Skehan (1998) defines tasks by the following criteria:

- i. Meaning is primary.
- ii. Learners are not given other people’s meaning to regurgitate.
- iii. There is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities.
- iv. Task completion has some priority.
- v. The assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.

Ellis (2003) states that tasks can be identified by the following features:

- ii. A task is a work plan.
- iii. A task involves a primary focus on meaning.
- iv. A task involves real-world processes of language use.
- v. A task can involve any of the four language skills.
- vi. A task engages cognitive processes.
- vii. A task has a clearly defined communicative outcome.

Nunan (2004, p. 4) goes on to provide his definition of a pedagogic task as being:

A piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing

their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form.

Common to most definitions is that a task must have a clearly defined goal for learners to focus on. The successfulness of the task can then be assessed based on that outcome. Tasks also tend to be focused more on meaning than form. Johnson and Morrow (1981) distinguish between “focus on meaning” and “focus on form”. In the latter, learners and/or teachers focus on isolated linguistic elements of the language, removed from its natural context. In “focus on meaning”, language is used for a communicative purpose, with meaning being transmitted from one party to another. Tasks, where the primary focus is on meaning, are inherently communicative in nature. An information gap is, of course, also necessary, for if there is no information gap, then there is no *exchange* in information and therefore no authentic focus on meaning. Tasks are essentially meant to simulate reality in the classroom.

1.3 Tasks in the Japanese context

TBLT has been purported by MEXT and received much attention in Japan (Takashima, 2000; Takashima, 2005; Burrows, 2008; Miyamoto, 2009; Sato 2010). While it is generally valued as a viable way to improve students’ communicative ability, Japanese classroom culture somewhat inhibits its effectiveness (Burrows, 2008). Interest in TBLT remains strong, however, with Takashima at the forefront, seeking to adapt the approach to the Japanese setting (Takashima, 2000; Takashima, 2005). Takashima distinguishes three levels of tasks:

1. task oriented activities (TOA)
2. task activities (TA)
3. tasks

In TOA, the teacher controls the language input and/or output to a greater extent and provides more scaffolding to students, while “tasks” conforms to the stricter definitions provided by strong-form CLT proponents. TA lies between the two. The idea being that if students’ language ability is not adequate to negotiate “tasks”, or if they are inhibited by classroom cultural factors, they may still benefit from somewhat more controlled activities. The researchers herein believe Takashima’s contribution to be very valuable in the Japanese context, but moreover, given the somewhat inconsistent definitions of tasks provided previously, we see no reason to limit our definition to the strictest terms of strong form CLT supporters. Takashima’s notions of TOA and TA fit within TBLT, especially when considering the Japanese context.

1.4 Operational definition of “task”

The researchers observed classes over a two-month period to document tasks in practice. Specifying an operational definition of “task” is therefore, necessary to identify such activities. From our survey of the literature and various definitions of “task”, three “rules” were amalgamated below:

Rule 1: There is a clear goal or outcome.

Rule 2: There is an information gap.

Rule 3: Focus on meaning is primary.

The activities which we observed in class had to meet these criteria to be called a “task”. Also, from the literature, tasks also have several tendencies, which we identified below, as “trends”:

Trend 1: Tasks frequently make use of authentic material.

Trend 2: Tasks tend to be student-centered.

A strict definition of “authentic material” would be material which was not created for the purpose of English learning, but was created for use in the real world. We adopt a more balanced definition of authenticity, based on Breen (1985). Material which was created for English learning can be considered authentic if it is directly connected to reality, and in particular, to the students’ needs outside of the English classroom. It was felt that including these “trends” as criteria to identify “task” would lead to too strict a definition. These do appear to be common traits of tasks, however, and indeed the tasks which we identified had these qualities.

2. Method

2.1 Research questions

The researchers are interested in the following specific areas:

1. Do teachers currently employ tasks in elementary school lessons?
2. Do tasks have a positive effect on students, vis-à-vis the goals of Foreign Language Activities, stipulated in the Course of Study?

2.2 Participants and procedures

The participant school is a national elementary school in Tokushima Prefecture. FLA was being conducted once a week under the current Course of Study. The two participating classes, henceforth known as Group A and Group B, were grade six classes with 37 pupils each. Initially, eight lessons were observed for each class (for total of 16 lessons) between September and November of 2012. The lessons were video-taped and the activities were described in notes taken by the researchers so that distinct tasks could be later identified and documented.

Following the lesson observation, in December and January, 2013, Group A was treated as the control group and given a lesson based on the textbook. Group B, the experiment group, was given a lesson which included a task. In the next lesson, Group A was given a task. The lessons are referred to as: A1, A2, and B1, wherein the letter refers to the group and the number refers to the lesson (the first or second lesson the groups were given). Thus, A1 had no task, while A2 and B1 included a task. It was felt by the teachers at the school that Group A would benefit from having a task in the second lesson and should not be treated strictly as a control group, receiving only ‘traditional’ lessons. This also allowed us to account for differences between the two groups

by comparing results from the same group under control and experiment conditions.

The students were given questionnaires to assess their attitude towards the lesson and material after each class. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions which were answered on a five-point Likert scale, where 5 indicated a strongly affirmative answer and 1 indicated a strongly negative answer. The questions are shown below in the “Results” section. Each question relates to goals specifically mentioned in the Course of Study, as well as to TBLT.

2.3 Outline of the three lessons

The three lessons are outlined in Figure 1, Figure 2 and Figure 3 below:

Part 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher followed “Hi Friends”, conducting the listening activity on p. 27 wherein students listen to and identify various fairy tales • Teacher leads a discussion on the origins of the various fairytales.
Part 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students listened to the “Momotaro” story from pages 28 to 36 • Students performed chants and repetition practice of specific sentences from the textbook

Figure 1: A1 (without task)

Part 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In place of the fairy tales from Hi Friends, students listen to stories about historical figures (Sakamoto Ryoma, and so on) and identify the historical person • Students recently learned about historical figures in their social studies classes and had returned from a school trip in the Kansai district where they had visited historically significant locations • Content ran parallel to “Hi Friends” but was related to students’ experience outside the classroom
Part 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students performed a role play task • Having inquired about students’ school trip, the teacher chose specific episodes that students had encountered on their school trip • Students worked in groups and recreated the episodes as skits • The task mirrors the “Momotaro” story but has students generating their own content instead of following the content in “Hi Friends”

Figure 2: B1 (with task)

Part 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher followed “Hi Friends”, conducting the listening activity on p. 27 wherein students listen to and identify various fairy tales • Teacher leads a discussion on the origins of the various fairytales.
Part2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students listened to “Momotaro” story and observed the altered ending • Students conducted a roleplay task, creating their original ending and performing it as a skit

Figure 3: A2 (with task)

3. Results

3.1 A description of tasks in the observed classes

Over the two-month observation period, it was found that teachers did employ tasks relatively frequently in their lessons, providing a positive answer for the first research question. Four distinct activities were identified as tasks, which are explained and discussed below.

3.1.1 Birthday calendar task

Students were required to walk around the classroom and interview several of their friends and ask “When is your birthday?” and “What do you want (for your birthday)?” Students wrote down the answers on a worksheet. The teacher then summarized all of the results and created a large calendar with all of the students birthdays included. The calendar was put on the wall so that at the beginning of each month, students could refer to the calendar and wish happy birthday to their friends whose birthdays appeared during that month.

This activity had a clear goal, that is, to construct a calendar. The goal was meaningful to the students since it was student-generated and it was put on the wall to be referred to every month. There was also clearly an information gap, since students could not have known the birthdays of all of their peers. Additionally, the focus was on meaning. The teacher allowed the students to conduct the activity freely, without correcting errors individually, and the students were also clearly focused on the communicative aspect of the task, rather than their own form.

3.1.2 Universal Studios Japan (USJ) information gap task

This was a pair work information gap activity. Student A was given Map A, which had various unknown buildings or attractions. Student B, with Map B, had to provide the location of these unknown attractions and also had to find the location of the unknown attractions on his/her map. This type of activity is common as a practice activity. It was classified as a “task” herein, because it coincided with students’ school excursion to USJ, adding authenticity to the activity. The teacher also deliberately provided the students with language options to complete the task: The language which students used was not heavily restrictive and students were able to experiment with the language. The activity also conformed to the three rules set out, having a clear goal (completion of the map), and an inherent information gap and primary focus on meaning.

3.1.3 Original t-shirt task

Students worked in pairs with a worksheet. Student A asked student B several predetermined questions about student B’s color preference, what shape they like, and how many shapes they would like. Student A then drew a shirt for student B based on their partner’s preferences. In the second part of the task, all of the T-shirts were put on a white board and students worked with a new partner. Not knowing which shirt belonged to their partner, they had

to ask similar questions about their preferences, and then find their T-shirt. Each step of this task was repeated twice, with the partners reversing roles. This activity also clearly fit the goals. It was also a student-centered activity, although the material was not seen to be authentic, since the resulting “T-shirts” were not deemed to be very realistic.

3.1.4 Find the most popular foreign destination task

Students initially guessed (hypothesized) which foreign countries would be the most popular destinations for their peers. Students then interviewed various classmates, asking “What country do you want to go to?” and “What do you want to do there?” Finally, the teacher surveyed all of the students and the answers were written as a list on the whiteboard. Students then checked their hypothesis with the teacher’s survey of the whole class. The results were discussed. This activity also had a clear goal (making a list based on a whole-class survey and checking your hypothesis). The activity had an inherent information gap, since students didn’t know their friends’ answers or the results of the survey, and primary focus was on meaning.

3.2 Questionnaire results

Figure 4 indicates how the results of the questionnaire are compared. First, the two different groups of students are compared, wherein the first group of students received TBLT and the second group of students did not. Second, two lessons given to the same group of students were examined where the first lesson did not include a task and the second lesson did.

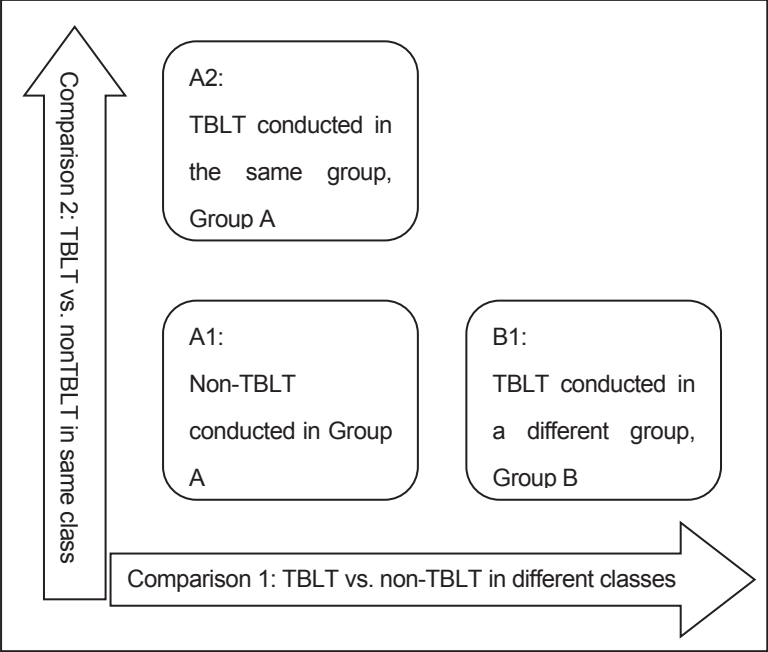


Figure 4: Two streams of comparison

The results of the questionnaire are shown below in Table 1. The number in each column represents the average score on the 5-point Likert scale for each lesson.

Table 1

Results of the questionnaire

Question	A1 (non- Task)	B1 (task)	A2 (task)
1. Did you enjoy today's activities?	4.03	4.49	4.00
2. Were the activities difficult?	2.22	1.86	2.11
3. Was it fun to speak and listen to English?	3.86	4.03	3.31
4. Did you feel "communication is fun"?	3.57	4.00	3.25
5. Did you feel the importance of communication?	3.84	4.11	3.44
6. Did you try to speak English actively?	4.05	4.22	3.47
7. Did you try to listen to English actively?	3.35	3.76	3.36
8. Did you enjoy the first activity?	3.95	4.57	3.67
9. Did you enjoy the second activity (the task)?	3.35	4.43	4.22
10. Did you deepen your understanding of English language and foreign culture?	3.11	3.62	2.86
11. Did you deepen your understanding of the Japanese language and culture?	3.32	3.73	2.83
12. Did you find language interesting?	3.70	3.95	3.44

The numerical result is the average score on the Likert-scale where 5 represents perfect agreement.

The results of the questionnaire, which relate to the second research question, are mixed. When each group was given one lesson, the experiment group seemed to benefit from the task, as compared with the control group which was not given a task. On all questions, scored higher,

indicating that they enjoyed the task-based lesson and recognized the pedagogic goals, deepening their understanding of foreign, as well as the Japanese language and culture, for example. In A2, however, when Group A was given an additional lesson, which included a task, their questionnaire results were lower than both the task-based lesson, B1, and A1, except for, importantly, question 9, wherein they were asked if they enjoyed the task activity itself. Thus, when Group A reflected on their second, task-based lesson in its entirety, they didn't particularly enjoy it or feel that they had successfully communicated or learned about the foreign language or culture. When they reflected on the second activity, however, which was the task itself, they indicated enjoying it. It is possible that Group A's attitude going into their second lesson was influenced by a negative perception of their first lesson. Perhaps the second lesson was redundant with the first, and they were eager to get on with their regular English classes. It is also possible that B1 received positive feedback not because of the task necessarily, but because of the content itself and its connection with students' life outside of English class. B1 can be considered a form of "content-based instruction" (Stryker and Leaver, 1997). The content of the first part of the lesson was adapted from their Social Studies classes, while the task was based on their school trip.

Given the small scale of this study, the mixed results should not be surprising. A larger scale study, wherein students are given more tasks over a series of lessons would probably yield more reliable results.

4. Conclusion

Although this was a small-scale study and the questionnaire results assessing student attitudes towards tasks are mixed, it is significant that teachers do seem to be employing tasks in their regular FLA classes. From interviewing the homeroom teacher, it became apparent that he did not know much about tasks or TBLT as discussed in the literature, and yet, four tasks were identified over the course of eight weeks. TBLT, with its focus on communication and motivation, seems to fit the goals of FLA. Striving towards those goals likely pushes teachers naturally towards task-like activities or a TBLT-like approach, whether or not they have training in TBLT. If teachers are inadvertently leaning towards tasks, it is important that they receive specific training in TBLT so that they are aware of the various goals, challenges and rewards of TBLT. If tasks are being conducted in elementary school, and the researchers would argue that they are entirely appropriate in that context, then they should be deliberate and focused.

Though this research attempted to focus also on student attitudes towards TBLT, longer-term and larger-scales would provide a better indication of the effect of tasks on students.

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