

[Brief Research Report]

## Developing Effective Japanese In-Service English Teachers: A Task-Based Language Teaching Approach

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to explore aspects of teacher education and development, considering how the learning activities during teacher education may contribute to this. It looks at how theories of language teaching help to enhance task-based language teaching, TBLT, and support Japanese in-service English teachers in a private school in Japan. The paper analyses the implementation of in-service teacher training to develop skills and address teachers' beliefs and concerns for students' achievement. By involving teachers in learning tasks and promoting constant reflection on their teaching practice, the course develops teachers' awareness of TBLT principles and encourages them to think about its practical application to their teaching context. The course objectives, its rationale, its theoretical framework and the problems found in the design are the focus of this paper.

**Keywords:** Developing language teachers, Task-based language teaching, Secondary school, Teachers' beliefs, Observation and reflection

### Rationale of the Research

#### Background of the Study

By the time Japanese students enter college or reach university, they will have experienced some form of English instruction, which is provided since the fifth year of elementary school from the age of nine (Butler, 2011). Despite using Japanese to explain grammar and vocabulary in order to help less proficient students, teachers often feel guilty about their students' excessive use of Japanese. Teachers may fail to present a convincing case as to why students should communicate in English, which would enable the students to practice the English being taught. After seven years of English instruction, students' knowledge of the language can, at worst, remain passive and unused. The only exception to this is the summative assessment undertaken in the form of university examinations or when they try for the TOEFL and the TOEIC within a few years.

According to Dalton (2014), Japanese universities can be observed to have declining competitive enrollees because of problems associated with demographic decline. To compete for the shrinking potential freshmen population, many universities are trying to recruit more foreign exchange students as well as increasing their foreign study opportunities. Whilst all

of these phenomena are occurring, forward-looking Japanese companies are trying to stay competitive amid the decline of the domestic market by expanding abroad. As a result, they are increasingly hiring graduates who not only have high TOEIC scores, but are also capable of interacting with foreigners in English and solving their problems. To market the Japanese products to local communities worldwide, companies have become more interested in hiring those who can accomplish a wide range of tasks in English.

These three scenarios — ineffective English instruction in Japanese schools before students reach the university level, changing demographic makeup in university, and increased interest of Japanese companies to only hire those who can accomplish tasks in English — highlight how important it is that Japanese students become more intrinsically motivated to learn English and learn the language more effectively. Japanese students undoubtedly need teachers who can improve their motivation as well as present them with better opportunities for English communication. Universities need students and companies need better English-speaking graduates. Given this scenario, Rivers (2013) suggests that teachers now have more reasons to look for better ways to teach Japanese students English well so that they are able to achieve a wide variety of tasks even outside school and not just perform through tests.

### **Chosen Topic**

This paper is designed based on the idea of task-based language teaching approach knowledge. It considers how this approach can work among teachers of ninth grade in-service Japanese English students so that misconceptions may be addressed and the approach is used more in the classroom. The rationale of the study mainly centers on the introduction of a new course of the study as put forward by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in 2013, which requires wide-ranging changes in how teachers teach English and learners learn the language in Japan. To establish the language teacher development needs and attempt to address them, I will draw on my 'insider perspectives' (Nakata, 2015) as a teacher of English at one of the schools in Tokyo. This institution is a co-educational private school with 210 students for each year, aged 12 to 18 years.

MEXT's objectives in introducing a new course of study is a direct response to the inadequacies of the grammar-translation approach of teaching English. According to Narawa (2006), this approach is the main reason why Japanese students cannot communicate well in English even if they learn the language in a span of six to eight years. Conversely, communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) have, it will be argued, positively influenced English language teaching worldwide. Japan is no exception to this trend. Although the term CLT is not clearly written in the Course of Study, it indicates that "they should be able to perform language activities in which they need to think about how to express themselves in an appropriate way to a specific situation and condition" (MEXT, 2008).

## Rationale of the Study

In secondary schools, there is a clear drive to raise standards of English achievement through raising expectations, national target setting and a focus on improving assessment. It is obvious that our school, especially ninth grade students, are affected by this new programme directly for university entrance examinations which will probably be renewed for the aim of achieving better English-speaking competence for graduates. The need to focus on improving students' speaking ability in class is widely acknowledged. However, there exists a disparity between the objectives of Japanese national English education — an English-only approach as expressed in the New Course of Study (MEXT, 2008) — and the way teachers trust that judicious utilization of Japanese could upgrade L2 learning. The ban on the first language in the English classroom, which is required by the new curriculum, is based on Krashen's (1988) assumptions that the L2 can be acquired in the same way as the L1. However, it is common that teachers often have no choice but to use Japanese to explain grammar and vocabulary. Besides, as English rarely plays an important part in students' daily lives, communicating in English-only in class probably makes students feel uneasy and anxious. Therefore, all English departments in Japan require more collaboration and discussion to improve and sensibly enact this area of the curriculum and to effectively introduce more speaking through task-based language teaching (TBLT).

Although TBLT has become a dominant approach to language teaching across the world, it has not displaced traditional methods in various EFL contexts, particularly in Japan. Brown (1995) suggests that helping teachers adapt to TBLT better is crucial as it is an approach that does not focus solely on grammar but on meaning and achievement of outcomes related to the use of English language. In Japan, the conventional form-focused approaches are still used, including grammar translation and presentation-practice-production (PPP). Although TBLT already made some progress in Japan, many still doubt the effectiveness of this approach. Teachers of Japanese English learners often wonder about its suitability for Asian students whose learning styles are often different from non-Asian English learners (Bruton, 2002; Burrows, 2008; Sato, 2009; Swan, 2005).

In terms of my context, implementation of this approach has been challenging for several reasons. Firstly, the department has no leader to drive change, offer advice, or with whom concerns can be shared. A leader or a teacher trainer is a completely different role with different powers than the head of the English department, which is more of an administrative rather than pedagogical function. Another reason was that change would involve a large amount of time, perseverance, and feedback, with very little help from colleagues. Getting to know what is happening in each class is a starting point. Once we see the class and feedback, observation gives us something we need to share with other members of a group as the same problem might have arisen in other classes or to other teachers. Discussing how best to teach or leading class effectiveness with my colleagues for 200 students is a necessary process for developing ninth grade English competence. It is

important to prioritize teacher development in this area so that progress can be attained.

When teacher development seeks to address task-based approaches, it is important to place this in the context of teachers' current practices and understandings. According to Ellis (2009) and Willis and Willis (2007), proponents of task-based teaching have argued that resistance among teachers to engage in TBLT is generated by their misconceptions and lack of understanding. Proponents also claimed that it is important that these misconceptions on TBLT be addressed. They claimed that traditional pedagogies, including PPP, failed to develop learners' communicative abilities (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2009). The contrary has been considered to be the case regarding TBLT. Indeed, second language acquisition as well as classroom-based research have, overall, emphasized the value of wider implementation of task-based teaching.

With relevance to the context of the present study, Cortazzi and Jin (1996) highlight that many teachers have justifiably questioned whether the communicative methodology is suitable in nations with 'cultures of learning' different from Western settings where the approach was developed. Additionally, with reference to Japan, Samimy and Kobayashi (2004:253) described possible "cultural mismatches between theoretical underpinnings of CLT and the Japanese culture of learning," which might arise from the importance attached by CLT rather than the content based on the Japanese national curriculum.

While TBLT and CLT are considered similar to each other, in that they are learner-centered, the two approaches cannot be considered the same. Certainly in both approaches the teachers act as advisors and facilitators. However, Littlewood (2004) suggests that in CLT, both the teachers and the students are communicators. This is not the case under TBLT in which the teacher mainly decides on what tasks will be suitable for their students' level, but it is up to the student to complete these tasks. Students are encouraged to communicate with their peers to complete these tasks chosen by their teachers. Littlewood (2004) explains that the teacher then points out errors and provides feedback. In addition, another critical difference between the two methods is that with the CLT method, students must have background knowledge on the linguistic forms, usage and meanings of English, while TBLT students will learn the form and usage of a specific English term when they need them in the moment to solve or complete the tasks assigned by teachers. Thus, it can be said that TBLT is best understood not as a new way of teaching but as a development or an upgrade within CLT (Littlewood, 2004). It is vital that Japanese teachers are aware of these techniques and are supported so that they are able to effectively implement them in their own classrooms. This paper will now proceed to outline the key contributions to the literature in this field to examine the challenges and opportunities for best practice in more detail.

## Literature Review

### Current Problems Linked with English Learning in Japanese Classrooms

Raising the level of English language, especially speaking, can be considered as a perennial challenge in most Japanese schools. Hashimoto (2009) suggests that although students in the public elementary schools in Japan, particularly in grade five and six, have progressively started to learn the English language, it is at the junior high level where students formally commence their English study. According to Underwood (2012), one of the goals of Japanese junior high school English education is allowing students to express simple ideas in English with basic grammar. Nishino (2008) states that while junior high school English teachers successfully help students to comprehend basic levels of English grammar, at high school level teachers normally encourage students to learn upper levels of English grammar, practice discussion, debate and develop presentation skills.

In Shirai (2012), it is argued that the new national English curriculum, officially implemented at public elementary schools from 2011, at junior high schools from 2012, and at high schools from 2013, is intended to transform the attitude of public school teachers toward English language education. These policies strongly reflect MEXT's intention to educate Japanese students as Japanese being able to utilize English (MEXT, 2002). Action research reveals that there exists a discrepancy between the goals of Japanese national English education, an English-only policy, as stated in the New Course of Study (MEXT, 2008a) and the way teachers believe that selective use of Japanese could enhance L2 learning in various ways within a communicative framework. The issues regarding how English teachers need to fit in the concepts of the newly implemented Course of Study have been discussed in the seminars for teachers and in the literature. Among those studies, implementing English-medium English language instruction for Japanese junior high school English language teachers is always controversial due to this discrepancy.

### Task-Based Teaching

TBLT is perceived both as a refinement or improvement of communicative language teaching (CLT) as well as a reaction to the criticisms directed towards form-focused models such as PPP. Ellis (2003) suggests that one of the most prominent criticisms against PPP is that the model does not wholly meet the most basic of requirement in CLT, which is to treat language mainly as a tool of communication and not just an object of study. According to Willis and Willis (2009), because the emphasis of PPP is disproportionately tended toward presentation and practice, at the production stage students become more focused on the correct grammatical form as opposed to the meaning of the words they are learning.

Before relaying the benefits of TBLT, it is imperative to know what essentially constitutes a task. According to Samuda and Bygate (2008), there are many definitions for this concept. Ellis (2003) synthesizes some of these definitions and claims that it is a work

plan that is primarily focused on meaning and engages various cognitive processes. He goes on to summarize that a task also involves real-world processes of language use and TBLT emphasizes that developing language proficiency is not an end in itself but a means to an end.

Lastly, a task is associated with a clear communicative outcome. Willis and Willis (2009) suggest that a given activity can be considered as being “task-like” if it engages the learner’s interest and is mainly focused on meaning. More importantly, a successful task-like activity is measured not through linguistic outcomes such as whether the language forms are used correctly; instead, the activity is measured through non-linguistic outcomes such as whether it can improve students’ usage of the language in real world activities.

### **Perspectives on TBLT**

The goal of this research is to provide Japanese EFL teachers with professional development in TBLT. Therefore, it is important to discuss existing perspectives and attitudes toward the approach, particularly in the context of Japanese EFL teachers.

#### **Pro-TBLT**

Some of the main arguments presented in support of TBLT include its consistency to second language acquisition research. Studies also claimed that TBLT can develop the learners’ abilities to conduct more meaningful communication using the English language (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2009). Under this approach, Beglar and Hunt (2002) and Willis and Willis (2009) emphasize that the learners’ need to engage with meaning is met so that it has become easier for them to develop a language system. More importantly, the TBLT approach makes sure that the motivation to learn English for learners is not exclusive to external motivation. Instead, learners are intrinsically motivated to learn the language. Learners under this approach can see that there are benefits to using the language and that there are many opportunities associated with mastering the language. Willis and Willis (2007) find that learners also know that even though they might produce errors in accuracy in grammar and form, they will not necessarily be penalized.

#### **Resistance to TBLT**

As can be seen in Japanese EFL contexts, TBLT is not universally accepted and its superiority continues to be questioned. As such, it remains a controversial approach linked with many concerns from some researchers as well as the teachers themselves. In Bruton (2002) and Swan (2005), studies have claimed that TBLT is not appropriate for low-level learners. An earlier study by Seedhouse (1999) asserted that it ends in impoverished language use that cannot provide significant acquisition value. Studies have also criticized its theoretical and empirical support, claiming that they are lacking (Bruton, 2002; Sheen, 2003; Swan, 2005). A much more recent study by Zheng and Borg (2013) claimed that

TBLT's definition is the main limitation because it is too narrow. Teachers who have willingly implemented this approach in their classrooms are required to do more than what is defined under the approach.

### **Reactions to Criticisms/Misconceptions of TBLT**

Reactions to these criticisms have also been documented. According to various researchers, it is not true that TBLT omitted the focus on form and it is not the case that the grammar syllabus is disregarded. These researchers examined some task-based teaching frameworks and found that these also focus on form but differently from the PPP model. They place the focus on form in the middle of the learning sequence or towards the end, rather than right from the start like the PPP model. Seedhouse (1999) suggests that researchers have also responded to the criticism that TBLT does not end in acquisition value and instead, can end in language fossilization. According to Ellis (2009), this is a grave misconception. Ellis claimed that the approach can be even more beneficial to the beginners because it provides them with a higher level of challenge by fully exploiting the available resources to develop strategic competence in English language use through authentic and meaningful tasks.

Ellis (2009) also claimed that it is not true that low-level learners will not be able to cope with TBLT. Even without a solid grasp of the grammar, TBLT can help learners effectively use the second language and develop their grammar with increased use of what they already know through maximizing use of language in real-life contexts. Little and Fieldsend (2009) even claimed that a study set in the Japanese context shows that low-level Japanese EFL learners experienced significant benefits in their language development. Kikuchi and Sakai (2009) specifically respond to the criticism that TBLT can demotivate Japanese learners, who are used to measuring their progress through grades and examinations as well as sequential acquisition of discrete language items. According to Kikuchi and Sakai, the use of non-communicative methods that excessively focus on grammar and examinations are likely to constitute the most demotivating methods for Japanese learners.

Willis and Willis (2007) claimed that one way to ensure Japanese learners who are more accustomed to form-focused exams can adapt to the TBLT approach is if there is a framework in place to show the students their progress. They claimed that by showing learners what learning opportunities they have been given for each lesson and how these opportunities increase as they progress through the sessions, putting the focus on grammar at the end of the cycle, learners' motivation can increase further. It seems that with adequate teacher training to develop a methodology appropriate to the context along with commitment to maximize the benefits of this approach, there is potential to successfully implement more task-based learning in Japan and persuade critics of its worth.

## Methodology

Having reviewed the relevant literature, this section will outline the methodology by the following research question which was formulated in order to address the target issue in the context.

RQ1: What do Japanese in-service English teachers need to know about speaking?

RQ2: What is important in teaching speaking?

To address the main research question, the following sub-questions will also be investigated.

Teacher perceptions:

RQ3: How do teachers feel about their speaking class?

RQ4: Which language teaching strategies can Japanese in-service English teachers see the value of TBLT?

RQ5: How can TBLT be effectively trialled through action research in their classrooms?

### Setting

The school, which is located in Tokyo, Japan, is a co-education private school with 210 students for each Year, aged 12 to 18 years. It has now enrolled 1260 high-school-aged students in grades seven to twelve during the 2017-2018 school year. The largest population subset is Japanese, and is followed by Chinese and Korean. The school has more girls than boys in its student population. The school has about 50 students out of 210 in each year who have experiences of living abroad in their childhood of more than a few years. The remaining 160 students, such as seventh grade, in 2017 have little contact with English speaking apart from listening to music; only a few regularly communicated in English either via writing or speaking in their primary school days before they joined secondary school. All participants enrol in the English course, which is credit-bearing and compulsory for seventh through twelfth grade students. As I teach some classes in seventh grade, their level of English is considered as higher elementary.

### Participants

The participants were Japanese in-service English teachers. For my research, the peer observation and the interviews were conducted with two Japanese English teachers in ninth grade age-group with/without international experience at a Japanese high school. Students in ninth grade were requested to record for observation in their English lessons with the pedagogic purpose. As the result, students were willing to participate for my research project.



## **Interviews and Peer Observation**

This section summarizes the practical plan which was put in place to develop teachers in TBLT, taking account of the benefits and challenges identified in theoretical and empirical studies and considering my particular context.

First, this research provided semi-structured interviews with open questions rather than those requiring straightforward yes/no answers. According to Duff (2008), interviews are an essential and commonly used source of case study evidence. Through this method, participants provided their perceptions and reasons for their verbal behavior or behavior which they were unable to fully express in their English language teaching. Second, Williams (1989) indicates that peer observation provides an opportunity to get feedback on one's teaching and gain an understanding of some aspects of teaching and classroom interaction. It is also possible to establish observational focus points related to the area(s) which both the observer and teacher are concerned with. Therefore, the notes for observation consist of brief descriptions as they occur, subsequently enabling us to provide feedback on key points to others.

The interviews were conducted in English for teachers so that the participants were able to express all potentially relevant information through their lessons. The interview was carried out with two Japanese in-service English teachers. Several questions led to follow-up questions and discussions. The questions were adapted from Zhiping and Paramasivam's (2013) study of student anxiety of speaking English in class. This study was of particular relevance to the implementation of TBLT at my school as anxiety in speaking English was a key area to be addressed. The questions were simplified and shortened so as to be utilized for peer observation and reflection, which can be seen in the following section.

### **Questions for teachers**

1. How do you feel in a speaking classroom? Why do you think you feel like this?
2. Have you ever experienced students' anxiety in speaking English in class? What strategies do you think teachers can use to cope with it?
3. Which language teaching strategies do you think enhance TBLT?
4. How can TBLT be effectively trialled through action research and subsequently implemented in our classrooms?

### **Qualitative Approach**

My research project was based on qualitative inquiry. It was because qualitative research seemed to be more appropriate to see effective teaching speaking strategies through the interview, peer observation and reflection. Teachers were able to think more carefully about what is behind their problem and consider the processes they utilize to facilitate learning for speaking activities. This assisted in providing valuable data, sufficient for the needs of the study. In Richards (2002), it is argued that adequacy and dependability

of data will be grounded not just in the variety of methods and sources, but in the practical skills of the researcher. Quality in qualitative research demands more than mere adherence to correct procedures and attention to relevant criteria, though these are certainly necessary. Qualitative inquiry in TESOL is, thus, an excellent source of information for novice, as well as experienced researchers in the teaching of English as a second foreign language.

Zach (2006) argues that there are no hard-and-fast rules about how many cases are required to satisfy the requirements of the replication strategy. Yin (2009) also suggests that "the typical criteria regarding sample size is irrelevant" (p. 58). Their theory has supported my choice of a qualitative approach to collect sample data which I obtained from two Japanese in-service English teachers to participate for my study. They were interviewed about what bothers teachers in oral tasks in English class and what useful teaching techniques in speaking might allow teachers' performance of oral tasks to be less stressful.

Teachers were probably uncertain about what they know about themselves, where their anxiety comes from and how their lesson is. Therefore, as Richards (1990) suggests, observing another teacher's classroom is a way of collecting information about teaching and classroom process which is a basic part of the learning. However, 'observation' can be an unpleasant event as the lesson, students and the teacher are involved in some degree, so assigning the observer a non-evaluative task should be considered minimizing the sense of threat. Reiterating that the interview was confidential and the anonymity of their answers is thus crucial.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Each interview was less than 15 minutes in length, and peer observation in a 45-minute lesson with field notes consisted of brief descriptions in note form of key events, which were recorded once every two weeks for two months with 30-minute reflections of each lesson with an observer. The analysis of the qualitative data included thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The first step was the transcription of the audio materials which served as the basis for further analysis in order to look for regularities of their teaching awareness (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Second, with the result of observation of each lesson and reflection, it involved discussion in order to reach useful understandings of their teaching.

According to Leo Bartlett (1990), reflection — in relation to reflective teaching — refers to the congruence between thought and subsequent action and how a teacher consciously situates themselves in relation to other teachers around them. This analysis clearly shows the contrast between an individual and the attitude as one significant social process; in this case, an English department at my school. By asking myself to reflect on the issue of TBL implementation, I responded as an individual, and then stepped forward to share perceptions and responses of the experience with colleagues in the department. As my awareness was raised, I became concerned, realizing I would be unable to solve the issue by myself. At the end of an action cycle we reflected critically on what has happened. Some of

the questions to be asked to prompt reflection are as follows:

1. What have you learned? What better strategies are out there?
2. Which way of doing this works best for you?
3. What are the barriers to change?

Vetenskapsrådet (1990) suggests that four aspects of ethical issues were included, such as information of the research project, consent, confidentiality and right to use. A brief introduction of the project was presented to the informants in order to give the teachers a clear picture of what was intended to study. Teachers were also informed that all information would be used purely for research purposes. Lastly, informants for interviews were asked to provide their signature, by which they gave permission for their data to be used according to the agreed terms.

Having outlined the methodological approach, the study will now move on to present and analyse the findings uncovered.

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international students in a Malaysian university. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 1(11), 1-16.

【要 旨】

効果的な英語教員能力開発における一考察 —タスク中心言語指導法における試み—

渡辺 洋子

2017年、日本の学校教育現場は、「教師主体」から「学習者主体」に大きく移行し始め、教師の英語運用力は教科指導を行う上で必要不可欠だ。教師は言語教育における理論的背景への十分な理解を踏まえて、授業に臨むことになる。「コミュニケーション・スキルを高める」とはどういうことなのか。なぜそのような授業が必要なのか。そのために教師はどうしたらよいのか。これらを共有することが指導法を柔軟にし「指導技術」を磨くことにつながると考える。ここでは1980年代以降、Communicative Language Teachingが発展し、提唱されるようになったTask-Based Language Teachingを授業に導入し、その現場での教師の役割について理解を深め、タスクの進め方や、効果的な指導上の改善点を考える。

キーワード：英語教師の指導力強化、タスクベース授業(TBLT)、中等教育、教師の考えと実践、研究授業と振り返り