Transforming textbook activities into successful tasks

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Recently, there has been much excitement over task-based language teaching (TBLT) and the potential benefits it holds for classroom language learning. However, the educational context in Japan poses a number of unique challenges for the teacher who hopes to implement tasks in the syllabus. This paper will discuss the particular socio-cultural phenomena that influence the Japanese university classroom, and how this applies to our understanding of TBLT. This socio-cultural analysis will then fuel recommendations for four key strategies that can be practically applied to transform ordinary textbook activities into successful tasks.

最近、task-based language teaching (TBLT) が言語学習の授業に効果があるのではないかと注目されている。しかし、日本の教育の現状ではTBLTを実践するには様々な難題、課題がある。この論文は日本の大学のクラスルームのなかに日本の社会的、文化的な要因がどう影響しているかについて論じている。この日本の社会的、文化的な分析を元にTBLTを行うにあたり４つの実践的な方法を勧める。

THE **TESOL** field has for many years been excited about communicative language teaching (CLT) as the premier means by which students can effectively study and acquire second language skills. Perhaps the most influential branch to grow out of CLT is task-based language teaching (TBLT). Many contemporary course books claim to be fully or partly task-based, classroom research is increasingly turning its attention to tasks, and task-based syllabuses are making their way into English faculties the world over.

Here in Japan, the popularity of TBLT is attested to by the great number of presentations on TBLT at *JALT2009*, as well as a special edition of *The Language Teacher* (March, 2009, *33*(3)) focused solely on this one area. However, despite the popularity of TBLT theory, the presentation/practice/performance (PPP) method has for many years been the standard teacher-training paradigm. From personal experience, I know that the PPP method is still expounded in TESOL and CELTA courses, for example. So, it seems likely that for many teachers, their actual classroom pedagogy still follows this same tried-and-tested methodology. What's more, most standard course books used in classrooms are structured in such a way as to make TBLT difficult – even those course books that claim the epithet "task-based".

It is hoped that this paper will be of use to teachers in Japan who want to adapt standard course books to make their lessons truly task-based. First, a greater understanding of the theory and research behind TBLT will help enable them to make the transition to task-based teaching, while a deeper awareness of the unique socio-cultural conditions that make up the Japanese university will aid in the effective implementation of TBLT in their classrooms.

What is a task?

First, we need to consider the definition of *task*. While there is broad agreement as to the general characteristics of tasks, there is some contention concerning the specific definition of a task. Long (1985) takes a broad view that defines a task as any kind of activity, something that is "done"; Kumaravadivelu (1993) views tasks as curricular content rather than methodological construct; while Nunan (2004) sees the focus on meaning as paramount. Teachers in Japan who need a practical working definition of a task, that helps them plan and organize classroom activities, would be better served by Skehan (1998), who defines *task* as an activity in which: (a) meaning is primary, (b) there is some communication problem to solve, (c) there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities, (d) task completion has some priority, and (e) the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome. To Skehan's five criteria just mentioned, I would add one more: (f) a task is a workplan.

According to this definition, (a) meaning is primary. Although (as will be argued later) form-focused activities have an important role to play in language instruction, the learners' focus must primarily be upon the communication of meaning. In other words, the English that students produce in the classroom should be used to convey meaning rather than just demonstrate the correct use of grammar or vocabulary.

In order for this to take place, there should be some kind of communication problem to solve (b), for example, an information gap. While the learners are focused on solving the problem, they are technically free to use whatever linguistic means they have to solve that problem. However, it is natural that certain language forms will be more useful than others in completing that task.

This problem that needs solving should be in some way related to comparable real-world activities (c). The task may represent an *actual* real-world activity (e.g. writing a real job application letter), or it may be *artificial* (e.g. drawing a picture of your partner's family). However, the processes of language use that result from performing the task should closely relate to those in the real world. In an ideal situation, tasks should be designed alongside a needs-analysis survey, so that the real-world activities represented by the tasks relate closely to students' language goals.

The completion of the task must have some priority (d), so that students remain focused and motivated to persist until the task is completed. Without this motivation, there is a real danger that students will get off-task and the activity will collapse. Also, the assessment of students' performance must be in terms of outcome (e). This outcome is non-linguistic and therefore irrespective of language forms used by the learners. One must also be aware of the difference between an "outcome", which is what the learners are working to achieve, and an "aim", which is the pedagogical purpose of the task. For example, an outcome might be a list of cities that your partner has visited this year, while the aim is to use the present perfect tense to ask questions and describe experiences. The students need not be aware of the aim, and actually may be better served if they remain unaware. An awareness of the aim may only serve to detract from the focus on meaning.

It should also be recognized that the conceptualization and planning of a task may be quite different from how the task is

actually performed by the students in the classroom setting. Thus, a final important characteristic of a task is (f), that it is a "workplan". This takes into account the fact that tasks do not always proceed as planned, and that they are dynamic and can be modified and adapted as they are being implemented.

TBLT and the Japanese socio-cultural context

Each country has a unique EFL teaching context, which influences everything that goes on in the classroom. In Japan, attitudes towards English are generally positive, and there is much support for English education at the level of public policy. A good TOEIC score is a welcome addition to any CV when job-seeking, and English educational programs on television abound. EFL classes have been compulsory for students in junior high school, high school and university for many years, and recently this has been enlarged to include elementary school (Torikai, 2005). However, despite this high priority, satisfaction with English education seems quite low (Prime Minister's Commission on Japan's Goals in the Twenty-First Century, 2000). Despite more than 6 years of compulsory English instruction, many people are unable to engage in basic communication with a native English speaker. As teachers, we should be concerned that our efforts at fostering language acquisition have so far been met with lukewarm results.

Proponents of TBLT would argue that this is exactly the remedy that English education in Japan needs. A great deal of research suggests that TBLT is highly effective when it comes to language acquisition. Such research suggests that language form is most effectively learned when learners are not focused on form, but rather focused on meaning (Krashen, 1982; Swain, 1985); and that learners need to actively use the target language for a real purpose in order to learn it (Montgomery & Eisenstein, 1985; Gass & Varonis, 1994; Van Lier, 2004). As TBLT is concerned with actual, real-world language use and the com-munication of meaning, it prepares students to tackle real-life language problems when they arise outside the classroom.

At the risk of perpetuating a stereotype, many native English speaking teachers have the view that Japanese university students are reluctant to participate in communicative classroom activities. A number of explanations have been proffered for this, including: shyness (Doyon, 2000), apathy (McVeigh, 2001), fear of negative evaluation (Brown, 2004) and fear of making mistakes (Kurihara, 2008). It is also possible that the educational culture of Japan may be at fault. Historically, the traditional education system in Japan encourages classroom setups where students are expected to participate passively. There is a lack of critical thinking, an avoidance of conflict and confrontation, and students only speak up when called upon by the teachers (Hofstede, 1986).

TBLT holds great promise to address these issues as well. Tasks engage the learner in the construction of meaning, which encourages self-expression and personalization, which in turn lifts motivation. Simply put, tasks are fun. When learners are able to contribute to the direction and focus of their language learning, motivation is increased, and the wall of shyness is decreased. Passive absorption is no longer an option, as students are required to be involved in the class work. As the primary focus is on the communication of meaning, students need not worry about making mistakes. In short, TBLT creates classroom conditions in which it is much more likely that language will be used and retained by the learners.

Another concern facing universities in Japan, which could be addressed by the use of tasks in the curriculum, is that competition among universities is intensifying. A declining birthrate and an aging population means that universities are increasingly unable to meet their admission targets (Eades, 2001). In order to attract students, there is great pressure on university heads to provide attractive courses that are well-liked by students. In my experience, because universities cannot afford to ignore

the student voice, great value is placed on student evaluation surveys. Arguably, the two most important areas of concern to educators are to raise student satisfaction and to raise students' levels of language attainment. If TBLT does actually result in higher levels of language competency, while also boosting student motivation and enjoyment, then that would be reflected in better results on student evaluation surveys.

Concrete ways to implement TBLT in the Japanese university classroom

When it comes to applying TBLT in the classroom and transforming common textbook activities into tasks, the teacher must make a number of informed choices concerning task design. I've narrowed these down to four main categories: focus on form (present vs. absent); information exchange (two-way vs. one-way); planning (planned vs. unplanned); and task solution (closed vs. open). The explanation of each category is followed by practical demonstration that shows how a traditional textbook lesson can be transformed into a task-based lesson. It is hoped that teachers will be able to apply these concrete examples in their own classrooms.

Focus on form

As the central component of TBLT is meaning-focused communication, students' attention should be directed away from a focus on form. The exchange of meaning should be the highest priority in a task. However, research has revealed that a focus on form at some point in the lesson will likely result in learners attaining much higher levels of accuracy than if form-focused activities are entirely absent (Doughty & Williams, 1998).

Another, purely socio-cultural reason for focusing on form, is that students often expect it. Most freshman English students have just completed at least 6 years of English education in which, more likely than not, their lessons were form-focused and teacher-centered. The dominant methodology of high school EFL classes still remains grammar translation, despite MEXT officially abandoning the grammar translation method in the 1980s (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). This method focuses on linear, isolated skills and gives a high priority to accuracy. A sudden switch to a task-based syllabus where students are expected to express original ideas and engage with their peers in the construction of meaning is unnerving to say the least. This can potentially result in student anxiety and dissatisfaction, caused by discrepancies between teacher and student expectations (Matsuura, Chiba & Hilderbrandt, 2001; Burrows, 2008). Therefore, many students would appreciate a retreat into highly structured, form-focused activities during the task-based lesson, if even for a short time.

In order to maintain the meaning-centeredness of the task, these form-focused activities should occur *after* the task completion, as a way of consolidating and highlighting what the students have hopefully just completed. If the form is presented too early, the students may just fall back on the manipulation of words in order to complete the task, rather than engage in the active construction of meaning.

Example lesson one: Lesson aim – to practice describing people.

A common textbook activity that follows a presentation, practice, performance sequence and focuses on form may look something like this. First, students read some physical descriptions of people. Then, they complete a gap-fill exercise by choosing correct verb forms when describing people. Lastly, students are asked to walk around the classroom with a picture of a person, and find a student with the same picture by asking questions.

In order to take students' attention away from focusing on form and instead concentrate on meaning, the last stage could be done first. Then, as a way of consolidation, the gap-fill could be done at the end, after the task has been completed. To further extend what has been learned, students could write a physical description of a famous person for homework.

Information exchange

A second choice that instructors must make concerns information exchange. A task with a two-way exchange of information is one where all participants have equal rights to speak in order to achieve the task outcome. With a one-way task, only one participant controls the flow of information. Although one-way tasks seem to come a lot easier to Japanese students, two-way tasks appear to be more efficacious for language acquisition. Long (1989) claims that "two-way tasks produce more negotiation work and more useful negotiation work than one-way tasks." (cited in Ellis, 1997, p. 596).

Example lesson two: Lesson aim – to practice talking about members of your family.

In *Passport,* a popular textbook used in Japan, a unit on the topic of family ends with the following activity: "Work with a partner. Draw a picture of your family in the box below. Tell your partner about your family. Ask questions about your partner's family." (Buckingham & Lansford, 2010: p.13). The first stage ("Draw a picture of your family") has no information exchange at all, while the second and third stages ("Tell your partner about your family. Ask questions about your partner's family") are only one-way exchanges.

This activity could be made into an effective task by ensuring that the information exchange was two-way. For example:

"Please draw your partner's family. Then, ask questions in order to find five differences and five similarities in your families' daily schedules."

Planning

Learners often produce higher levels of fluent, accurate, and complex language when they have time to plan their output (Foster & Skehan, 1997, as cited in Skehan, 1998). The effect of planning time is different according to the nature of the task, and a positive increase in one skill area sometimes means a decrease in another. However, it is generally understood that there is a positive effect on task performance from planning. In addition, as Japanese students often have a high level of language anxiety and are often reluctant to take risks in the classroom for fear of being negatively evaluated, planning increases confidence (Brown, 2004).

Example lesson three: Lesson aim – to practice talking about places, using the verb 'be'.

Face 2 Face: Beginner (Redston, Cunningham & Bell, 2010, p. 49) has the following activity on the topic of places around town. "Take turns asking and answering questions about places like these in your neighborhood: a bookstore, a gym, dance clubs, drugstores…" Then, following these instructions, is an example dialogue:

A: Is there a good bookstore in your neighborhood?

B: …

A: And are there any drugstores?

B:…

This activity has no planning time before students begin, and is also very tightly controlled. It is likely that this will result in a

mere manipulation of forms, without any genuine communication taking place.

This activity could be transformed into an effective task by providing better use of planning time. For example: "You are looking for a new place to live, and think that perhaps your partner's neighborhood could be good. Write down four things that you think are important in a neighborhood (e.g. train station), and four things that you don't want (e.g. noisy dogs). Then talk to your partner and decide if his/her neighborhood would be a good place to live."

Task solution

The task solution can either be open or closed. An open task is one where there is no predetermined solution, for example, discussion, presentation or storytelling. Conversely, a closed task dictates that there is one single solution that students are required to find. Two examples of a closed task are a story sequencing activity, and a spot-the-differences game. Long (1989) notes that "[c]losed tasks produce more negotiation work and more useful negotiation work than open tasks." (cited in Ellis, 1997, p. 598). Negotiation includes clarification requests, confirmation checks, self-expansion and greater sentence complexity.

Closed tasks are also well-suited to the Japanese classroom, where learners have a strong desire to know the correct answer. Unless the topic is intrinsically motivating, open tasks often lead to students getting off-task and the activity collapsing. (Although, even with motivating topics, there is a real risk of students getting excited and abandoning English altogether, completing the task in their L1.) Having a single, correct answer provides a strong incentive for students to persevere with the task until the outcome has been reached and also gives a strong sense of satisfaction once the task has been completed.

Example lesson four: Lesson aim – to practice language associated with travel.

Here are the instructions for an activity found in *World English 1* (Milner, 2010, p. 65) "Talk about past vacation trips. Take turns with a partner telling about a vacation you took."

For all but the most motivated students, this activity would be unlikely to succeed. By transforming this open-ended activity into a closed task, the chances of success would be higher. For example: *Student A* thinks of a vacation he/she has taken recently. *Student B* asks up to 20 questions in order to guess where *Student A* went. *Student B* cannot ask, "Where did you go?" Some things you may like to ask about are the food, the drinks, the famous attractions, the weather, and so on.

Conclusion

Task-based instruction is an important branch of communicative language teaching that holds great promise for the Japanese university classroom. The potential for TBLT to transform students, classrooms and the wider language learning community is great indeed. However, without some understanding of the theory behind TBLT, coupled with an awareness of the socio-cultural factors that influence our classrooms, many of the benefits will be lost. Not all tasks are effective with all students all of the time. In addition, even with textbooks that claim to be task-based, there are many instances of activities that are unlikely to succeed in our classes without some degree of adaptation. The four key strategies presented in this paper can aid teachers in transforming ordinary textbook activities into effective tasks, in order to promote effective language learning.

Acknowledgement

Grateful thanks to Loran Edwards for much advice and support in editing this paper.

Bio data

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Appendix 1.

Summary of task design strategies

Task design	Example textbook activity	Example task
1. *Focus on Form* Only after the task completion stage.	Stage 1: Gap-fill exercise to choose the correct form of the verb "be" when describing people's appearance. Stage 2: Walk around the classroom with a picture of a person, and find someone with the same picture.	Stage 1: Walk around the classroom with a picture of a person, and find someone with the same picture. Stage 2: Gap-fill exercise to choose the correct form of the verb "be" when describing people's appearance.
2. *Information exchange* Two-way, rather than one-way	1. Draw a picture of your family. 2. Tell your partner about your family, and ask questions about your partner's family.	1. Draw a picture of your partner's family. 2. Find five differences and five similarities with your families' schedules.
3. *Planning* Allow planning time	Take turns asking and answering questions about places like these in your neighborhood: a bookstore, a gym, dance clubs, drugstores… A: Is there a good bookstore in your neighborhood? B: … A: And are there any drugstores? B:…	You are looking for a new place to live, and think that perhaps your partner's neighborhood could be good. 1. Write down four things that you need (e.g. train station), and four things that you don't want (e.g. noisy dogs) in a neighborhood. 2. Talk to your partner, and decide if his/her neighborhood would be a good place to live.
4. *Task solution* Closed solution, rather than open	Talk about past vacation trips. Take turns with a partner telling about a vacation you took.	Student A: think of a vacation you have taken recently. Student B: you have 20 questions to discover where Student A went. You cannot ask "Where did you go?" Some things you may like to ask about: the food, the drinks, the famous attractions, the weather, etc.