

Point to Point

A Response to Criticism of TBLT in Japan's Language Classrooms

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This response explores some of the flaws in Rintaro Sato's recent *JALT Journal* article regarding the unsuitability of task-based language teaching in Japanese EFL contexts. Sato's article centers on what he terms *realities* in the Japanese language classroom that he contends make TBLT an impractical approach. This paper considers those arguments in brief and expresses reservations about such arguments in language education.

Rintaro Sato's recent article (2010), arguing against task-based language teaching (TBLT) and for the effectiveness of the presentation-practice-production (PPP) model in language classrooms in Japan, is a thought-provoking piece that deserves careful consideration. However, in arguing that there are certain "realities" surrounding Japanese EFL that TBLT proponents cannot reconcile, Sato exposes the vulnerability of his own position, while also failing to address the issue of how best to foster communicative competence in language learners at the secondary level as recommended by MEXT.

It would be problematic to insist that the PPP model is wholly without merit. The PPP model seeks to eliminate the possibility of learner anxiety

by providing a controlled environment for students to learn grammar structures and vocabulary (presentation and practice) before being given the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of the presented structures, as well as their overall target language proficiency, in freer, simulated situations (production). The initial focus on structures that the PPP model emphasizes also appears to serve a practical purpose for a context such as Japan, where examinations for university entrance and professional licenses hold greater importance than any immediate need to use the target language in communicative situations. It could be argued that language educators would do well to consider how best to incorporate at least some of the essential aspects of PPP into their teaching in order to foster understanding among learners.

Problems arise, however, when Sato places TBLT in direct opposition to PPP. Such a divide has not been posited in either theory or practice, which suggests that Sato's approach is novel, but not necessarily solid. The mistake in Sato's logic is to criticize TBLT as a teaching approach with rigid principles that cannot be adapted to Japanese EFL, while conceding that PPP in fact needs modification to achieve the desired results. Sato acknowledges, for example, that production may not be emphasized enough in the PPP classroom to build speaking abilities (for any number of reasons, one of which may be a focus on presentation for the purpose of test preparation). "Some revisions to the traditional PPP approach are obviously needed," says Sato in his conclusion. Yet his argument affords no similar concession to TBLT, which, he implies, forbids at all costs both the treatment of grammar structures and communication in the native language.

That Sato does not allow for any kind of modified approach to TBLT in the EFL classroom raises questions as to the validity of his argument. Regarding the inevitability of using L1 in the classroom, for example, the relevant literature has documented many examples of TBLT that concede at least some use of L1 during classroom activities (Carless, 2007; Swain, 2000). Ultimately the notion that any teaching approach in its purest form can be made practical in the language classroom represents flawed thinking. Practice demands that educators be flexible in their pedagogy and adopt any number of approaches in classroom use depending on circumstances.

Finally, there is a provocative implication in Sato's article that should cause consternation in many parts of the EFL community in Japan. Sato's rationale for the dismissal of TBLT from the Japanese EFL classroom stems from the presence of certain so-called realities regarding Japan's test-taking culture, intended target language use, and the language used for communication in the classroom. Because these circumstances exist, the best course of action,

Sato suggests, is therefore to adopt a particular approach primarily because it does not challenge the status quo. Educators who have long sought to reform language education in Japan need to consider how best to respond to such an audacious call for counter-reform. If the goals of language education in Japan include raising the level of oral communication, educators must find ways to adopt a pedagogy that fosters communicative skills, regardless of existing or potential obstacles such as those that Sato discusses.

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On Methodology in Japanese Secondary English Classrooms

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The article recently published in this journal by Sato (2010) discusses the effectiveness of the presentation-practice-production (PPP) method and task-based language teaching (TBLT) for English education in secondary schools in Japan. Discussions about methodology are to be welcomed, but the article does not provide enough evidence to justify its conclusion—that the PPP model should be the primary methodology.

First, the model of second language acquisition (SLA) put forward by Sato is not representative of mainstream thought in the field. According to the model, the process of SLA consists of three stages: declarative knowledge is 1) acquired, 2) proceduralized, and 3) automatized (Anderson, as cited in Sato, 2010). No other processes of acquisition are mentioned in the article. The problem with this is that almost no current research in the field of SLA contends that all knowledge must be learned as declarative knowledge first. Dekeyser (1997, p. 197) points out that Anderson's early model is "controversial" and explains that Andersen himself has "relaxed" the claim that all knowledge begins as declarative or explicit knowledge (Anderson and Fincham, as cited in Dekeyser, 1997, p. 197). In recent years, thanks to the effort of researchers such as Rod Ellis, Nick Ellis, and Robert Dekeyser, the notions of implicit learning and implicit knowledge have been incorporated into most SLA theories.

Second, the article touches on the problem of educational goals, but fails to present a clear picture of what goals are appropriate. The article questions the suitability of TBLT in Japanese secondary classrooms, mainly on the grounds that such activities are not effective in getting students to produce target structures (Sato, 2010). Yet, the author also proposes that TBLT can be used in the third stage of the PPP method (Sato, p. 198). It is not clear whether the author is suggesting that fostering communicative ability is a legitimate goal of secondary education in Japan. If the overriding goal of classroom activities is the acquisition of target structures, TBLT has little to

offer, according to the author's own analysis. On the other hand, if communicative ability is a goal of the classroom work, then the author's complaint that TBLT does not help students produce target structures is not a logical argument against it.

The author mentions MEXT's policies requiring teachers to focus more on communicative skills and to use English in the classroom, but argues that (a) most Japanese students have "test-related" rather than "communication-related" motivation, and (b) Japanese is still the primary language used for secondary English education (Sato, 2010, pp. 193-4). The problem with this argument is that it puts the cart before the horse. Certainly, there is a gap between what MEXT wants and what happens in the classroom. There is also no denying the negative backwash from high school and university entrance exams which do not place value on students' communicative ability.

What is needed, however, is not continuation of the status quo, but rather for MEXT and secondary school English educators to attempt to find some common ground through a broader discussion among all of the stakeholders on the goals and purposes of English education. Is it desirable for secondary English education in Japan to continue to be focused primarily on skills needed for entrance exams? Or, instead, does fostering communicative ability need to receive more emphasis? Until some consensus is reached on this issue, we will have no standard for considering which classroom methodologies are appropriate.

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A Reply to Responses to “Reconsidering the Effectiveness and Suitability of PPP and TBLT in the Japanese Classroom”

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My suggestion (R. Sato, 2010) to utilize the presentation-practice-production (PPP)-based approach was more out of consideration for effective teaching and learning to improve Japanese students' communication abilities in English than for Japan's test-taking culture (though this aspect should not be totally ignored). I would like to make clear that my suggestion is not to use the traditional PPP model but a revised PPP model.

Although there are multiple definitions of “task” (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 1989; Skehan, 1996), Matsumura (2009) succinctly summarizes the core concept of a task: The primary focus is not on form but on meaning; it has not linguistic but communicative outcomes; and it is an activity involving real world language processes or cognitive processes similar to ones in real world language use. Ellis (2003), on the other hand, writes that focused tasks are aimed at eliciting learners' use of specific linguistic features, but primary focus should still be on meaning. Due to these multiple definitions, it is difficult to attribute any one idea to a single author on task-based language teaching (TBLT). However, it appears that explicit form-focused instruction and intensive form-focused practice are not regarded as crucial, and are often dismissed in TBLT (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 1989; Skehan, 1996). However, explicit knowledge about structures as well as activities such as imitation, repetition, pattern practice, drills, and memorization, that is to say, *practice*, are in fact necessary in input-scarce EFL environments (Ding, 2007; Saito, 1998; Yamaoka, 2005).

In Sato (2009) I introduced Saito's (1998) learning model, which starts with the input stage followed by the practice stage and then the final output stage. This model, which puts importance on explicit knowledge and utilizes drill activities, is almost the same as that of PPP. Without learning the principles (or the rules) of target structures by being given grammar instruction

(either explicitly in the L1 or sometimes implicitly in the L2) followed by a great amount of conscious practice, Japanese junior and senior high school students, who are generally regarded as low-level learners if, for example, we refer to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines (ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines–Speaking, 1999), are not likely to use English for communication. In their daily lives they are not exposed to English and there is no actual need for communication in English. Other researchers have identified limits to TBLT in the Japanese EFL context. Although Miyamoto (2009) does not reject the positive effects of tasks, she notes that it is difficult to teach grammar systematically to her high school students through a task-based syllabus, considering the Japanese EFL situation and her students' motivation. Miyasako (2010) takes the position that TBLT cannot function in the Japanese EFL environment due to its dependency on implicit learning. Muranoi (2006) introduced a revised PPP based approach: the presentation-comprehension-practice-production (PCPP) sequence, and argues that this more content-oriented approach can effectively improve Japanese EFL students' communicative abilities.

There must be stages (the first two Ps) in which learners can understand and practice the language so that they can use it later in actual communication (the last P). In junior and senior high school classrooms, learners, at first, have to create and ideally strengthen the foundation for communication. Then they should definitely be given the opportunity to use English in the production stage: the opportunity to produce their own output through a communicative activity or a task. The task can be a closed one in which learners are supposed to use target structures, or an open one that gives them freedom to choose which grammatical structures to use. We also can delay or repeat the open production task later when students may be able to use implicit knowledge about the structure.

In R. Sato (2010), I introduced a model of skill acquisition theory. In response to Urick, I acknowledge that not all knowledge is first acquired as declarative, or explicitly, and then developed into procedural knowledge; in some cases learners may acquire procedural knowledge without having declarative or explicit knowledge. However, this does not mean teachers cannot or should not teach in ways to foster explicit knowledge or declarative knowledge first. Though I promote the use of a modified PPP model, it is important for practitioners to understand that the theory is not without its weaknesses. In addition to my suggestions to revise the traditional PPP model in the paper, I argue that by providing a great amount of input, teachers should try to create situations where students can improve implicit

knowledge. I could have perhaps discussed this in more detail in my paper. However, I still question whether the notion of implicit knowledge and implicit learning can be incorporated into instruction for Japanese secondary-level learners.

Note that I did not dismiss the effects of TBLT as is evidenced by the following: "It can improve learners' motivation and help develop true fluency ... activate the atmosphere of the English classroom, improving students' positive attitude for communication" (R. Sato, 2010, p. 198). It is, however, my view that one of the biggest flaws of TBLT is its emphasis on implicit learning, often at the expense of explicit conscious learning. TBLT can sometimes be used effectively according to the purposes of the class, in a supplementary way, at the junior and senior high school levels.

In my paper, I merely discussed and suggested a revised PPP-based approach, without mentioning how an adapted version of TBLT might also be used in the Japanese EFL environment. I acknowledge that this was unfair. In fact, the effects of an adapted TBLT approach in developing junior or senior high school students' communicative abilities as well as grammatical accuracy have been reported (Fukumoto, 2010; Matsumoto, 2010; Naito, 2009; Okumura, 2009; S. Sato, 2010). However, in most of these cases, there were pre-specified target structures and instruction (either implicit or explicit) followed by practice. In other cases, the adapted TBLT approaches suggested by the authors were conducted in a supplementary fashion. The sequences of the TBLT styles at least shared the crucial concept of PPP. I argue that modified TBLT can be effective for secondary learners if it includes (a) instruction of the target grammatical structure, whether done explicitly or implicitly, and deductively or inductively; (b) enough practice which focuses on the form; and (c) opportunity for output, or that the modified TBLT approach is implemented in a supplementary fashion. However, it can be questioned whether this can actually be called TBLT, and this can be said of some of the adapted versions of TBLT introduced above (of course, I admire those flexible and well-modified methods). We should also take into consideration the possibility that many students learning through a modified version of TBLT were engaged in accuracy-focused grammar learning in *juku* (cram school) or their own after-school learning.

I agree that we should try to overcome obstacles and reform English education to raise the level of oral communication among Japanese students. To realize this goal in junior and senior high schools, improvement of teachers' English proficiency and a departure from the traditional grammar translation method are needed. In conclusion, I want to reemphasize the importance of

teaching Japanese junior and senior high school students explicit knowledge of English language structures, followed by a great amount of practice and real communication opportunities to use what has been learned.

Thank you very much for your responses to my paper.

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