

# Task-based learning challenges in high schools: What makes students accept or reject tasks?

Robert Stroud

University of Nottingham

This paper takes an original approach to investigating why high school students in Japan may decide to undertake or reject tasks in task-based learning (TBL). Issues with non-participation, noise, and a lack of involvement are common experiences for high school teachers using tasks where students are left alone to work in pairs or groups. Such problems can be attributed to low motivation and discovering what it is about tasks that students find most motivating is very fruitful for task design purposes. A post-task motivation related survey was distributed to 196 junior and senior high school students twice after different tasks. Specifically, grabbing the attention of and creating a feeling of satisfaction for the students were found to be of the most significance for motivation to occur. Suggested directions for teachers of TBL with regards to motivational task design are offered in conclusion.

本論は、日本の高校生がtask-based learning (TBL)のタスクに取り組むか拒否するかをどのように決めているかを、独自の方法で検証した。ペアワークやグループワークなど生徒に任せるタスクを使用する場合、不参加や騒音や関与不足などの問題がしばしば見受けられる。タスクに対する動機づけの低さはその問題の原因となるので、タスクのどのような点が生徒の動機づけを最も高めるかを知ること、タスクをデザインするうえで非常に有益である。動機づけに関するアンケート調査を、196名の中学・高校生に対して、異なるタスクの後で2度行った。調査結果の中で、生徒の関心を引くことと満足感を生み出すことが、動機づけを高めるために最も重要であることが分かった。結論として、TBLにおいて動機づけを高めるタスクデザインに関する提案を行う。

English teachers in Japanese high schools have in recent years been feeling the pressure to improve the communicative competence of their students in the L2 (Hymes, 1972). MEXT (2003) announced ambitious proposals to get students communicating in English at a higher level in the near future, and so more traditional teaching methodologies (such as the grammar translation method) need to be seriously reconsidered. What is truly needed is an approach which incorporates the use of meaningful communication between students, rather than more grammar-based class work for example.

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is just such an approach. It considers language to be a means for communicating meaning and focuses on improving student communication skills through active class work. The expression of meaning during communication is considered the primary purpose of CLT, and language forms (such as grammar structures) are the means by which this can be achieved. The study of the use of and approach to introducing CLT into classrooms has been extensively discussed (Canale & Swain, 1980; Richards & Rogers, 2001; Riley, 2008; Tanaka, 2009).

One teaching methodology falling under the category of CLT, which is potentially suitable for the nurturing of communication in high school classes, is task-based learning (TBL). TBL uses tasks performed by students to encourage verbal and written communication in the L2 in order to improve L2 communication. TBL classrooms are typically student-centered, use contextualized language, and aim for a highly communicative atmosphere during the undertaking of tasks.

The use of TBL as a potential teaching method in classrooms has also been widely discussed (Boekaerts, 1987; Carless, 2002, 2007; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 1989, 1991; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996a, 1996b). However, the introduction of such an unfamiliar approach to language learning to a Japanese high school classroom environment is clearly not going to go as smoothly as would be hoped. It is therefore the responsibility of teachers to ensure that tasks match up well with students motivationally and that classes become motivated by and involved in the tasks they receive during TBL classes.

### TBL issues in Japanese high schools

Tanaka (2009) stated that Japanese high school students “expect the teacher to assume the role of authoritative expert; while CLT imagines students as active, egalitarian participants in a learning process that involves open negotiation” (p. 112). Students in a society adhering to conformity, not surprisingly, often feel a sense of discomfort being put into a much more power-balanced environment with higher expectations put upon them as independent learners (Hu, 2005).

Issues that commonly occur due to this unfamiliarity include classroom noise, discipline problems, overuse of the mother tongue, and a lack of involvement in tasks (Carless, 2002, 2007). Implementing a style of teaching such as TBL into Japanese high school classes will clearly come with these kinds of initial problems. However, all of the issues discussed are related to student motivation. It is realistic to believe that by creating more motivational tasks for students, teachers can resolve such issues, at least in part, by ensuring students are motivated to undertake the tasks they are given. By doing so teachers can feel free to leave students as autonomous, independent learners during task time, without fear of unwanted disruptive or non-productive behavior.

### Motivation and task design

Since the 1980s, there has been a rise in the number of researchers turning their attention towards analyzing the way learners are motivated through the design of their activities and the effects of different elements of tasks and activities upon motivation (Cheung & Dörnyei, 2007; Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei & Csizer, 1998; Gagne, Briggs, & Wager, 1988; Madrid, 2002; Papi & Abdollahzadeh, 2012; Small, Dodge, & Jiang,

1996). By considering the way in which students are presented with, carry out, and get feedback on tasks tailored especially for them, language teaching in Japan can start to move a step closer to highly motivated classes.

In the context of high school students in Japan, finding out how to tailor TBL tasks to be more appealing to students is a crucial step forward for the present issues, such as discipline, already mentioned. A simple breakdown and analysis of motivational elements for currently used tasks is explained below.

### The ARCS model

The ARCS model of motivational design was created by Keller (1987, 1992) with the intent of analyzing and improving the motivational design of activities and classes, so as to be as motivational as possible for students to do. It regarded motivation as the overall goal in instruction and broke motivation down into four main parts: (1) attention (perceptual arousal, inquiry arousal, and variability); (2) relevance (goal orientation, motive matching, and familiarity); (3) confidence (learning requirements, success opportunities, and personal responsibility); and (4) satisfaction (intrinsic reinforcement, extrinsic rewards, and equity). Suggestions have been made as to the simple implementation of such a model for tasks currently in use (Cheng & Yeh, 2009; Keller, 2000; Morrison, Ross, & Kemp, 2004; Suzuki & Keller, 1996) through analysis and redesign of tasks.

In this study, the ARCS model was used to analyze and design different tasks in terms of their motivational level for students. Rather than asking students very vague questions regarding the tasks, the four variables of the ARCS model were focused upon in feedback. By focusing the analysis of the motivational design of the tasks through just the four variables of the model, a clearer view of what motivates students to do the task could be obtained. Discovering how much the task design elements related to visuals, content, language level, and feedback on the tasks, for example, are linked to motivated states for classes during tasks would be very valuable for teachers. Knowing how to get students more focused upon and involved in tasks is of course a priority for TBL success in Japanese high school classes which constantly experience motivational issues.

## The experiment

### Research questions

The two questions addressed in the experiment were:

1. Is Keller's (1987) ARCS model a good analytical tool for addressing the motivational design of tasks for Japanese high school English classes? In other words, does it correlate well with reported motivation to do tasks by students?
2. How strongly are the four investigated motivational components of the tasks (attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction) correlated to motivation to do tasks by the students?

### Instrumentation

#### The tasks

Two different tasks were undertaken by each student (one designed to be more motivating than the other) in order to gain a variety of feedback on motivation from students with regards to tasks. It should be made clear that the use of two different tasks was not to see what improvement could be made to motivation through use of the ARCS model (with *t*-tests, for example). It was in order to use the range of data collected to find any highly significant correlations between motivation and design elements of the tasks. By using more than a single task (with potentially repetitive feedback) a better view of links between task design and motivation could be gathered with a second, differently designed task added.

The tasks were designed around the suggestions made by Keller (2000) on how to improve activities for students using the ARCS model. Task 1 was designed to be reflecting a fairly poorly motivationally designed task and Task 2 as similar in many ways to Task 1, but designed to be more motivating for students using Keller's suggestions (see Appendices A and B for lesson plan and model implementation details). Task 1 was based on the theme of park rules in Japan and Task 2 was based on cartoon (*anime*) characters and their characteristics. Both were what Willis (1996b) called *creative tasks* for TBL and followed a similar pattern to Willis' (1996a) three-stage model for TBL (with a pre-task, task, and post-task section for each). The tasks were designed to be as similar to each other as possible and varied only by the ARCS variables. Nunan's (1991) conceptualization of tasks was

used to ensure this similarity (through both tasks sharing the same curricular goals, input data, activity and procedure, teacher and student roles, and settings and conditions).

#### The Task Motivation Survey (TMS)

This post-task questionnaire (see Appendix C) was produced with the intent of measuring student ratings of the ARCS score for a task (Part 1) and student self-reported motivation for the same task (Part 2) by using a Likert scale of 1-5 for a total of 26 items. The first part contained 20 items, five of each representing the four constituent variables of the ARCS model (attention, relevance, confidence and satisfaction). Attention referred to whether or not students found the task to capture and hold their attention, relevance referred to whether the students found the task to be relevant to their learning goals and interests, confidence referred to whether the students believed in their ability to be able to do the task, and satisfaction referred to the feelings of achievement and value that the students may have while doing and on completion of the task. The second part contained six items representing student motivation for the task based on motivation to participate and stay alert during it.

## Method

### Participants

The experiment consisted of 12 different classes of students totaling 100 third-year junior high school students (in six classes) and 96 first-year senior high school students (in six classes) from the same combined private junior and senior high school in Kanagawa, Japan. There was a mixture of sexes and class sizes were between 14 and 18 students. Classes were held once a week for 50 minutes.

### Procedure

After successful piloting of the tasks and survey, 12 classes undertook the two different tasks described in the instrumentation section of this report (Task 1 and Task 2) across two weekly classes. Six classes (three junior high and three senior high) did Task 1 first and six classes (three junior high and three senior high) did Task 2 first. The survey was administered post-task and the data were then entered into SPSS version 15 software for analysis. Negatively worded items were reversed and no outliers were found. The Cronbach Alpha reliability values of all the

variables were found to be satisfactory: attention (0.84), relevance (0.73), confidence (0.68), satisfaction (0.83) and self-reported motivation (0.82).

### Results

The first research question asked if the ARCS model is a useful tool to analyze how motivating a task will be for high school students in Japan. By looking at student answers to the survey a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient value was calculated between the task ARCS score (total score for Part one of the survey as a percentage) and self-reported motivation (total score of Part two as a percentage). A strong positive correlation was found between the two (see Table 1),  $r = 0.779$ ,  $n = 392$  (two surveys for each of the 196 participants),  $p < 0.005$ , with high values of task ARCS score associated with high self-reported motivation. This indicated that 61% of the students' self-reported motivation could be explained by the ARCS score given to the task completed by the student. This is a significantly high value and confirms that tasks which match up with what Keller (1987) saw as containing motivating factors (in terms of students attention, relevance of content to their needs, give them confidence to perform it, and provide a feeling of satisfaction) are indeed significantly correlated with how much students wish to do them.

**Table 1. Correlation between student Task ARCS score and self-reported motivation**

		Self-reported motivation
Task ARCS score	Pearson correlation	.799**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	.392

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The second question approached in this report was about how strongly each of the ARCS variables (attention, relevance, confidence or satisfaction) are correlated to motivation to do the tasks in TBL for high school students. By looking at the correlations within the survey between attention, relevance, confidence, satisfaction, and motivation for the individual students ( $n = 392$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ) we can see that all four components showed significantly strong positive Pearson correlations with motivation (see Table 2), suggesting that student attention, relevance of the task, student confidence to do

the task, and student feelings of satisfaction doing a task all have strong connections to the student motivation to do a task in TBL. The most significant variables however were satisfaction ( $r = 0.769$ ) and attention ( $r = 0.727$ ).

**Table 2. Correlations between the four ARCS components and self-reported motivation for students**

	Attention	Relevance	Confidence	Satisfaction
Self-reported motivation	.727**	.542**	.513**	.769**

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

### Conclusion

This study has briefly looked at the issues that practitioners of TBL face in high school English classrooms in Japan. Common problems have included a lack of discipline, too much mother tongue usage, and a lack of student involvement in tasks. This report approached these motivation-related problems from the angle of task-design and adopted a motivational design model to analyze tasks and see where tasks might be succeeding or failing to motivate high school classes.

A strong and significant correlation was found between Keller's (1987) ARCS model and self-reported motivation by students, suggesting that the use of a model for analyzing and designing tasks can be very fruitful for TBL in high schools in Japan. Additionally, the variables which stood out as key motivators were *attention* and *satisfaction*. The importance of visual stimulation and attention grabbing with materials and realia, for example, was found to be of utmost importance for situational motivation. A strong focus on perceptual arousal (with attractive pictures on handouts), inquiry arousal (with quizzes about unknown data related to the student's interests) as well as variety of visual usage and task sections is recommended (see Appendix A for more details).

In terms of the satisfaction experienced by students for the tasks, a most likely influence on this came from a scoring system used for tasks (awarded by the teacher on Task 2's worksheet) and prizes awarded (chocolates in the case of this experiment) for completing tasks. However,

a regular use of extrinsic rewards is not recommended, as student motivation may well shift away from intrinsic to extrinsic if *baited* too often with such rewards. A task design recommendation therefore is regular intrinsic reinforcement with task scoring systems, teacher praise, and encouragement of displaying of student work to other students, teachers, and parents (see Appendix A for more details).

The remaining two variables of relevance of the task to the learner's needs and interests and confidence to complete the task showed significance for motivation, but appeared to play slightly more of a back seat role on the whole when compared to attention and satisfaction. However, a full implementation of the model (with a heavy focus on the variables of attention and satisfaction already discussed) for tasks is recommended to most certainly produce more motivated classroom environments in high schools around Japan.

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**Robert Stroud** holds an M.A. in Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching from the University of Nottingham and is an experienced junior and senior high school teacher within Japan. His research work focuses heavily on motivation and willingness to communicate for students within the classroom environment. He continues to strive to find new ways of helping Japanese students to enjoy speaking out in English in a comfortable environment, using modern teaching methodology such as task-based learning, and regularly conducts mixed-method classroom research to tackle the issues of communicative language teaching for Japanese students. He can be contacted at <chelseaboy-bob@hotmail.com>.



### Appendix A. ARCS model motivational analysis of the experimental tasks

	Task 1 – low motivational design	Task 2 – high motivational design
<b>Attention</b>		
1. Perceptual arousal	No pictures on handouts, no realia shown and no example pictures shown.	Attractive pictures on handouts, realia (a comic) shown and example super hero drawing shown to class.
2. Inquiry arousal	Pre-task quiz relates only to Japanese laws, thought to be of little interest to the students.	Pre-task quiz designed to arouse curiosity about foreign as well as Japanese cartoons and example super hero drawing used as a quiz to arouse curiosity.
3. Variability	No pictures or variation of presentation of images used, and no guidance for breakdown of time for task completion given.	Different displays of images (realia, example task super hero and worksheet pictures) used and task broken down into different sections (thinking, drawing, writing, practice and presenting time).
<b>Relevance</b>		
1. Goal orientation	No guidance given on the use of the language in the task.	Students told about the use of the language in the task introduction (to describe people they know) and students given an example super hero version of the teacher.
2. Motive matching	Task topic thought to be unrelated to student interests or motives to study English (Law in Japan).	Task topic is thought to be linked closely to student interests and communicative interests (cartoon characters and describing people).
3. Familiarity	Task may not relate to students' daily lives (they may never go to the park or have knowledge of the rules there).  Task is also not broken down into sections they are familiar with (left to complete as they pleased).	Task relates to student knowledge and experiences (cartoons they are aware of in their daily lives) and methods of learning similar to structure they are familiar with (language introduction, examples given, task undertaking and presenting).

Confidence		
1. Learning requirements	No example task given and no scoring system used. Students unclear on required focus for achievement or how to succeed.	The use of an example super hero and a scoring system enabled students to feel confident about and understand requirements for focus of effort.
2. Success opportunities	No scoring system or breaking down of the task into steps left students less chance to feel success during or after the task.	A scoring system gave students more of a feeling of success.  Breaking up of the task into sections (language introduction, examples, task, and presenting) gave students smaller, manageable goals to achieve at a steady pace.
3. Personal responsibility	Students took no real responsibility for their undertaking or outcome of the task, due to a lack of performance measurement (a scoring system).	Students could attribute success to themselves for their own efforts on the task with a scoring system (awarded by the teacher).
Satisfaction		
1. Intrinsic reinforcement	Students told to hand in their sheets and the end of the task and no instructional design is used to enforce intrinsic motivation.	Students told to introduce their character to their next teacher and family at home if they wish.
2. Extrinsic rewards	No rewards, prizes or specific praise given to any pair.	Students are given rewards for completing the task and prizes are given to the best three pairs (in terms of scoring). Students are given praise from the teacher for good scores for their tasks.
3. Equity	No scoring system means students can choose to work hard or not and get the exact same feedback from the teacher. A feeling of unfairness may follow.	Rewards given to only those who complete the task in time and prizes given to those who have the highest scores.  Scoring system is explained prior to the task and students are shown how it can be considered to be fair.

## Appendix B. Lesson plans

### Task 1 - Park Rules Signs

- Pre-task (5 minutes) – Students are asked about laws in Japan and complete a true/false worksheet about laws in Japan. The teacher reads out the answers once completed.
- Task (20 minutes) – Pairs write five real rules that they know for a park in Japan on the sheet, as well as things they can do in that park and factual data about it. Students draw a picture to represent a real scene in the park. Students present this to their teacher after 20 minutes. The students are told they must not just stop when finished writing, but should rehearse their presentation of their data with the teacher together.
- Post-task (10 minutes) – Students present their worksheet data to the teacher and practice while waiting for their turn to present. No prizes, rewards, or scores are given to the students.

### Task 2 - Favorite anime characters

- Pre-task (5 minutes) – Students are shown a Japanese comic book and asked questions about it. Students then work in pairs to complete a quiz worksheet about animation characters. After completion, the teacher provides the answers.
- Task (20 minutes) – Students create their own character in pairs and the teacher scores them on a) English used (more challenging = more points), b) creativity (in language patterns and character design) and c) effort. The students get a score at the end of the task time from the teacher and are told that completed sheets earn a candy for each student and the best three character sheets will receive a bonus candy. The teacher shows an example of a created character (large blow-up sheet) and shows the scores given. Students are told to continue adding to their design/English or rehearse presenting it until time is up (not just sit around).
- Post-task (10 minutes) – Pairs present their character to the teacher and get a score for it.

Students practice with each other while waiting for their turn. The teacher corrects the students after presentation and asks them to present their character to someone else for homework. Each pair with five completed and presented facts gets one candy per student. The best three scored pairs receive an extra candy per student.

### Appendix C. Task Motivation Survey (TMS)

English version (Survey was distributed as a Japanese version).

**Please tell your teacher about today's task.**

*The questions are about how you feel about the task you just did. Please answer all questions honestly. Circle the number which best matches your opinion.*

1 = not true, 2 = slightly true, 3 = moderately true, 4 = mostly true and 5 = very true.

#### Part 1

1. The task was challenging, but not too difficult or easy for me to do.
2. There was something interesting about the task that captured my attention.
3. The task was more difficult than I would have liked it to be.
4. Completing the task gave me a feeling of satisfaction.
5. It was clear how the task related to things I already know about in the world.
6. The task captured and sustained my interest.
7. The English I learned was important for me.
8. I was confident I could use the English required in the task.
9. I want to learn more about the topic.
10. The task was dry and unappealing.
11. The task was relevant to my personal interests in English.
12. It is clear to me how people use this English in real life.
13. I enjoyed completing the task.
14. I was confident I could complete the task.
15. I think the variety of materials, visuals, pictures, etc., in the task kept my attention.
16. The type of task we did was the same old thing we always do.
17. I felt good about finishing the task successfully.

18. The task DIDN'T include English that was useful for me.
19. I DIDN'T really understand the English in the task.
20. I DIDN'T think the task was worth my time and effort.

#### Part 2

1. I wanted to do the task.
2. I wanted to listen to my teacher explain and help me with the task.
3. I didn't feel like trying hard during the task.
4. I felt like participating in the task.
5. I wanted to listen to and understand my partner doing the task.
6. I wanted to look at or do something different from the task.

Note:

- In part 1: Attention items: 2, 6, 10 (reversed), 15, 16 (reversed); Relevance items: 5, 7, 11, 12, 18 (reversed); Confidence items: 1, 3 (reversed), 8, 14, 19 (reversed); Satisfaction items: 4, 9, 13, 17, 20 (reversed).
- Part 2 consists of six Motivation items (3rd and 6th are reversed).

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