Socio-cultural barriers facing TBL in Japan

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This paper aims to highlight potentially problematic areas when introducing task-based learning into the Japanese university classroom. It argues that factors prevalent in collectivist environments, such as Japan, minimize what Willis (1996) claims are the main strengths of task-based learning. It further hopes to demonstrate this weakening of the approach is due to a combination of the model's structure, in addition to socio-cultural and cognitive influences. In conclusion, suggestions are made which could reduce the influence of these factors and lead to a more productive language learning experience.

本稿では，日本の大学で「タスク中心の学習」を導入する際に問題になり得る領域に着目する。日本のような集団主義の国で起こる様々な要因によって，Willis (1996) が「タスク中心の学習」の主な長所と呼ぶものが最小限の効果しか上げることができないと著者は主張する。さらに，このアプローチを弱めるのは，社会文化面や認知面での影響に加えて，このモデルの構造とのコンビネーションであることを論証したい。最後に，これらの要因を減らし，より生産的な言語学習経験ができるような示唆をする。

Real-life interaction

In recent years applied linguistics has seen a move away from a linguistic syllabus to one built around the sequencing of real-life, communicative tasks. This shift, it is argued, offers a richer exposure to language use, while providing the motivation required for students to build on their existing language repertoire. Proponents claim this use of the language satisfies what is known about second language acquisition, by furnishing contexts that make the learning process closer to real-life language situations, as:

> People of all ages learn languages best, inside or outside a classroom, by not treating the languages as an object of study, but by experiencing them as a medium of communication. (Long & Robinson, 1998, p.18)

Fulfilling these objectives led to the development of task-based learning (TBL), an offshoot of the communicative language approach (CLA), which views the learning process as inextricably linked to the completion of goal-orientated, meaning-focused activities. These activities or tasks, which lack a restrictive grammatical focus, afford students a range of specific, non-linguistic outcomes to be reached through communicative interaction. This corresponds with Nunan's (1989) definition of tasks as:

> A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. (p.10)

Despite these goals, the effectiveness of TBL is influenced by several factors prominent in "collectivist countries" such as Japan (Hofstede, 1986, p.312). The factors include: (a) the learning style of Japanese students, (b) the learning expectations of Japanese students, (c) socio-cultural differences, and (d) the structure of TBL. After a brief review of TBL's pedagogic aims, each of the above factors will be addressed. Finally, suggestions are

made that, if incorporated into the TBL approach, may help to improve the effectiveness of the approach in Japan. These suggestions are intended to apply to TBL in Japan and represent possible solutions rather than endorsement of particular teaching methodologies.

The aims of task-based learning

The different phases of TBL are intended to maximize the pedagogical and interactional focus on completion of the task (Seedhouse, 1999), thereby satisfying the four conditions of exposure, motivation, real language, and a focus on form, which Willis claims are needed to effectively learn a second language (Willis & Willis, 1996, p. 59). This emphasis on "fluency as the basis for linguistic accuracy" (Willis & Willis, 1996, p. 45) maintains that the variety of interaction produced is more productive to language development than the actual linguistic forms used. This divergence from a typical CLA approach affords students the linguistic freedom to choose from their existing resources to focus on a broader range of lexicon when completing the task, rather than "bits and pieces of language" in isolation (Brown, 1994, p. 229).

Such a rejection of traditional form-focused activities assumes students can internalize grammatical features, in addition to producing the rich and varied lexical items necessary to help language competence gradually improve (Willis, 1996). It is claimed that it is this application of existing linguistic knowledge which links cognitive learning to linguistic functions encompassed by task completion, allowing "the unit of syllabus design to drive [students'] systems forward" (Willis & Willis, 1996, p. 10). This interaction at the heart of TBL means success (however one measures it) depends on the degree and nature of student involvement.

The learning style of Japanese students

Willis (1996) recognizes that TBL's expectations of autonomous learning and student independence represent learning strategies that vary from Japan's pedagogical traditions. Such "Western cultural approaches" (Jones, 1995, p. 229) can render expectations of student input and active participation unrealistic, as they fail to acknowledge Japanese students' cognitive processing style or "an individual's preferred and habitual approach to organizing and representing information" (Riding, 2001, p. 48). What has been labeled a "lack of predominant learning style" (Reid, 1996,

p. 336) can be evident during the TBL pre-task brainstorming stage, when some students have difficulty completing activities that call for their own creative input. Furthermore, TBL claims that students enjoy working independently from the teacher are not supported by my own research (Burrows, 2005), which reveals a preference for more opportunities to interact directly with the teacher, and to receive reassurance, correction, and encouragement.

Japanese students' different cognitive profile suggests they should be taught ways to learn (Jones, 1995), in addition to the language itself. If given the freedom to choose a preferred learning style, they will do so based on their own experience, thereby negating the purpose of being afforded the choice. To overcome these preconceptions, teachers need to raise "awareness about the pedagogical approaches" (Bygate, 1994, p. 243) and explain the rationale underlying the selection of each task. Students must also be made to recognize that learning an autonomous approach (which TBL ultimately is) is not a simple transmission of knowledge, but a collaboration as they attempt to express their own meanings for their own learning purposes.

Further assumptions of TBL, in regard to students being able to notice or induce the information required, are not supported by a 5-month evaluation (Burrows, 2005). This highlights that it is not enough for students to immerse themselves in the target language and hope acquisition takes place. I am suggesting students should not simply be provided with comprehensible input, but that it is important to present tasks that tap into, but don't rely on, student learning styles. Without such activities, too heavy a burden may be placed on students ill equipped and unaccustomed to such learner autonomy.

Student expectations

Due to different teacher-student beliefs in regard to the role of the learner, the classroom will not always be seen as a meeting place between student expectations on the one hand, and curricular content and pedagogical appropriateness on the other. The teacher-centered nature of the Japanese education system "shapes and maintains students' beliefs and concepts they hold in regard to the language learning process" (Wenden, 1991, p. 34). Like many other Asian countries this system tends to value group consensus, and employs rigid, teacher-centered teaching practices. In such an environment the teacher's knowledge is bestowed to the student, while s/he passively lets

"the wisdom 'pour into' him" (Brown, 1994, p. 17). This results in a reluctance among students to engage, interact with, or question the teacher. As a result, instances of student dissatisfaction are likely when teaching is inconsistent with student beliefs (Burden, 2002). The strength of these expectations is recognized as a potentially significant element when making the transition to the "apparent randomness" of TBL (Bowen, 2004). Awareness of this discrepancy or "hotspot," as referred to in research by Woods (1996, p. 71), is potentially problematic as students move from a teacher-centered system to an autonomous learning environment. It is therefore imperative that these kinds of false assumptions and prejudices which underlie students' attitude towards their role in learning are not ignored.

These "mismatches" between expectation and the teaching approach (Rausch, 2000) clearly illustrate that Japanese students and their foreign language teachers do not share the same understanding of what comprises proper classroom behavior. Nunan (1989) concurs that:

> No curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centered unless the learner's subjective needs and perception relating to the processes of learning are taken into account. (p. 177)

The strength of this influence means that students' knowledge and attitudes are the key to language success, and involving them in the collaborative process, through incorporating their cognitive and learning preferences, is essential.

Socio-cultural differences

Even within the classroom the situation is not only determined by cognitive and expectancy concerns, but also affective dimensions. Such is the strength of these dimensions that they often determine the level of participation among students, and even render opportunities to communicate and express feelings unproductive. Consequently, rather than be a motivation to use the L2 (as TBL maintains), TBL activities can often result in the prominent use of L1, labeled by teachers as "the most prominent difficulty" during a TBL lesson (Eldridge, 1996, p. 306). From my experience this is evident in activities where students could easily use their L2, when the context is personalized and relevant, yet those activities still result in minimal L2 interaction. Other socio-cultural manifestations which can be observed in the Japanese classroom are: (a) students seldom initiate discussion, (b) students generally avoid raising new topics, (c) students rarely seek clarification,

and (d) students are reluctant to volunteer answers (Anderson, cited in Wadden, 1993, p. 102).

The significance of this is illustrated in the following common complaint among native English teachers in Japan.

> [Students] seldom volunteer answers, a trait that many Western instructors find extremely frustrating. Most Japanese will only talk if specifically called upon, and then only if there is a clear-cut answer. This does not necessarily signify an unwillingness to comply, but may simply indicate that the student is too nervous to respond, or too uncertain of the answer to risk public embarrassment. (Anderson, cited in Wadden, 1993, p. 102)

TBL interaction

The nature of the task in TBL also has a direct influence on the type and characteristic of the interaction produced, with linguistic forms treated as a vehicle of minor importance (in accordance with Willis' 1990, p. 127 definition). It is even recognized (Nunan, 1999) that certain activities (e.g., categorizing is often used in the pre-task stage) may or may not actually involve the production of language itself. Therefore, the lack of structure, in addition to the linguistic freedom it accords, means that it is the task itself, argues Seedhouse (1999), which actually constrains the kinds of linguistic forms used, in effect minimizing linguistic output.

Another weakness of TBL, cited as one of its main strengths, is its claim to improve student motivation. The omission of a focus on form only seems to restrict the lesson to "teaching how to do tasks better" (Nunan, 2001, p. 279), rather than providing opportunities for students to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself. As a result, the type of interaction produced during the task-cycle also raises questions about how much students' language proficiency is being extended. It is clear that TBL can over-emphasize the importance of just "getting the job done" (Robinson, 2001, p. 184) at the expense of improving target language ability. This is supported by Seedhouse (1999) who highlights that TBL interaction often seems "very unimpressive" (p. 153) as there is:

> A tendency to produce very indexical interaction, (i.e., interaction that is content-bound, inexplicit, and hence obscure to anybody reading the extracts). Interactants in a task seem to produce utterances at the lowest level of ex-

plicitness necessary to the successful completion of task. (p. 153)

Lack of empirical evidence confuting such claims has lead to questions about what has actually been proven in TBL. Seedhouse notes the results from the Bangalore project seem to be "less than conclusive" (1999, p. 154) and only tentatively support the claim that grammar construction can take place through a focus on meaning alone. If the primary function is "to facilitate the unfolding of the learner's powerful internal syllabus" (Robinson, 2001, p. 184), it appears to be contradicted by evidence (Burrows, 2005) that much of the negotiation occurs in L1. Students seem to distinguish between the tasks, which are conducted in L2, and negotiation of meaning in L1. Therefore, the first objective of using tasks as a means of encouraging more L2 use appears unsuccessful.

Implications

TBL's emphasis on first acquiring lexical forms before grammar does not address the difference between the Japanese and English language. Without a chance to use targeted language (not target language), not just to practice forms but also to achieve tangible results, the limited nature of TBL interaction becomes apparent. Without a more structured lesson, assuming that awareness will occur is presumptuous as it fails to provide the correct context for Japanese students. Students will not start to notice differences; realise preferred learning styles; and put aside cultural, social, and affective factors because of this approach. Without explicit instruction Western teaching strategies will not instigate or motivate a feeling of the onus being on students to develop communicative competence.

Furthermore, a lack of communicative opportunity during the lesson can influence not only linguistic ability but more lastingly motivation. A lack of perceived linguistic improvement is evident with many Japanese university students regarding themselves as beginners, despite almost seven years of instruction. This can affect motivation and result in what McVeigh (2001) terms an "apathetic attitude" resulting in a loss of academic interest. Students see this failure to improve proficiency as essentially due to a lack of ability. One of the advantages of CLA is that students can view the progress being made. CLA's provision of opportunities to practice and master each linguistic target has a direct effect on motivation in addition to confidence. This achievement encourages a "sense of accomplishment, a sense of value

in the instruction itself, and a resultant confidence boost" (Burden, 2002). Therefore, although the aim of TBL is not to perfect student production of the target language, this is how it will be viewed by many Japanese students, resulting in any failures of production being perceived negatively (Burden, 2002).

TBL's opportunities to use the L2 freely can be appreciated, yet assume a certain level of linguistic competence. There is much practice that is required before this can be achieved, from simple exercises, to more complex and lengthy activities. In designing task sequences it is important to consider that this process is recognized in the salience of the pedagogic goals of the task. It therefore requires particular emphasis placed on activities that provide students with a sense of achievement and personal accountability, and help them think about the process of language learning and how to approach it more effectively. Also, a focus on teaching the principles of interaction, interdependence, and individualism in the language learning process is also needed. These cooperative strategies may alleviate the otherwise negative self-perceptions that evolve from poor individual performances. Repeated failure is demotivating for students, so the concept of a "reasonable challenge" (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991, p. 46) has to be realistic in what can be achieved.

Conclusion

Although TBL appears to have strong theoretical and pedagogical arguments which offer students more of a challenge than the display activities used in CLA, it is my conclusion that it leads to less productive lessons in a collectivist culture like Japan. The desire for students to be able to negotiate real situations is a learning objective most English language teachers would aspire to. However, a teaching approach which places too heavy a burden on students is not only unrealistic but also unreasonable. Few would argue that the teacher dominated, initiation-response-feedback pattern needs to be used more often, but the other extreme of merely "furnishing conditions in the classroom" (Krashen, 1982, p. 72) also seems equally undesirable.

The different shades of TBL demonstrate the possibility for a more fused form of the model, incorporating a certain focus on form. In which case, a compromise or hybrid (Nunan, 1989) could be developed which integrates a systematic approach to grammar and lexis in a comprehensive approach adaptable to changing student needs (Bowen, 2004). This hybrid would need to

have a balance between a focus on form, accuracy, and complexity, with a focus on communication. This has resulted in some teachers adopting a mixed approach where form-focused components are added to complement task-based activities. These activities have very specific outcomes, making it easier for students to evaluate their success. Another option could be to incorporate more tasks which are loosely structured with a less specific goal.

It is my opinion that because of the strength of cognitive and socio-cultural factors, they cannot be overcome regardless of the teaching methodology. Their influence may be minimised, but this would require teachers acknowledging and bearing responsibility in adopting teaching methods or methodologies which recognise the importance of culture. This necessitates teachers adopting activities which may seem too teacher-centred, but meet student expectations and maximise student involvement in the learning process.

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