

Facilitating collaborative dialogues through TBLT

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Few longitudinal studies on Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) have been conducted in English language classrooms in Japan. This study explored TBLT with Japanese nursing students, non-English language majors. It examined (1) how nursing students perceived and engaged in TBLT classes for a year, and (2) how their speaking skills were influenced by TBLT. Toward these aims, I used both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Speaking tests and surveys were examined quantitatively, and students' conversations were investigated qualitatively with sociocultural perspective by means of the occurrence of Negotiation for Meaning (NfM) and peer assistance. According to the surveys, students were supportive of TBLT tasks and their confidence in writing and speaking English improved. Testing results indicated that their speaking skills developed and their NfM and peer assistance improved.

タスク中心の言語指導 (TBLT) は語学の教員に広く知られた指導法であるが、実際の英語の授業におけるその効果の長期に亘る研究は少ない。本研究では英語を専門としない看護短期大学生を対象とし、(1) 1年間のTBLTの授業に対する学生の取り組みと捉え方、(2) TBLTの会話力への影響、を検証した。収集されたデータは質的・量的に分析され、協同的会話の中の意味の遣り取りや仲間同士の支援は社会文化的観点から精査された。その結果、学生はTBLTのタスクに肯定的で英語のスピーキングに自信を深めていた。さらに、スピーキング力は向上し、協同的対話における意味の遣り取りや仲間同士の支援の数も増加した。

MOST RESEARCH in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been conducted with students who had studied the target language overseas, or had majored in the target language in college. These students are assumed to have strong motivation for language acquisition, which might also improve teachers' motivation to study TBLT for further effective teaching. Non-language major students, however, are likely to be less motivated language learners. Most college curricula in Japan include English language classes and many non-language majors are required to study an additional language for their graduation. Since they are non-English language majors they spend fewer class hours studying other languages. As a result, their language improvement is limited. Students are often dissatisfied with ineffective and unrelated studies. Consequently, language teachers may be less prone to cater to the disinterested students. Researchers may also be reluctant to examine the effectiveness of TBLT with non-language major students if favorable results were not expected. Since researchers have accumulated the results of TBLT research primarily using motivated English-language



students, it may be time to broaden TBLT research in language classes for non-English language majors. Many students could benefit from a TBLT approach revised appropriately for their particular interests. With this in mind, a yearlong study was conducted at a Japanese nursing college oriented to the following research questions:

1. How did the students perceive and engage in TBLT?
2. How did TBLT influence the students' speaking skills?

Surveys of the students suggest a positive attitude toward the effectiveness of TBLT and an improvement in their writing and speaking skills, speaking tests indicate their improvement in speaking, and a qualitative analysis of two students imply a potential for improvement not evaluated in the speaking tests. Although both speaking and writing abilities were measured for this study, I will focus on the development of the speaking ability in this paper.

Prior to presenting the study, the TBLT task will be defined, a sociocultural perspective on the language acquisition process will be explained, and previous studies about TBLT supporting improvement in language abilities will be reviewed. Finally the procedures and results of the study will be followed by analysis and discussion.

Theoretical background

Defining task

Some practitioners accept the definition of *task* as a synonym for exercise or practice. However, task, in the context of TBLT is different from the broader understanding. The definition formulated by Willis (1996) states that "tasks are always activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome" (p. 23). This definition is applied in this research. Ellis (2008) explains

that a communicative purpose is "a language-teaching activity where meaning is primary, there is some kind of gap, students are required to use their own linguistic resources, and there is an outcome other than the display of language for its own sake" (p. 981). Therefore, a genuine task offers learners opportunities to use the target language for purposeful and authentic communication.

A sociocultural perspective

The sociocultural perspective is based on the cognitive perspective (Swain & Deters, 2007). The cognitive perspective is supported by the hypothesis that language is learned through an information interpreting mechanism in human mind involving input, processing, and output of information. This mechanism functions when negotiating meaning with interlocutors, or Negotiation for Meanings (NfM). Thus, NfM would be improved by meaning oriented task applications. Compared to the individual aspect of the cognitive view, sociocultural theory interprets language learning as a social phenomenon (Lantolf, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Ohta, 2000, 2001; Swain, 2000, Swain & Deters, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1999; Wenger, 1998). Swain and Deters (2007) explained that "higher cognitive functions develop from interactions with the social milieu and are mediated through language and other semiotic artifacts" (p. 821). Sociocultural perspective is an integral part of TBLT, which utilizes the social and cultural interaction in communication between the learners.

Reviewing the literature

Although there is currently little solid evidence supporting TBLT (Ellis, 2005), several recent studies are worth noting. Sato and Takahashi (2008) conducted a three-year long study with more than 200 senior high school students. Students engaged



in collaborative speaking tasks with different partners based on compositions about familiar topics. Multiple data sources including student surveys, videotaped speaking tests, essays, portfolios, and group interviews were analyzed. Using both qualitative and quantitative data, the study showed that these students improved both fluency and accuracy through repeated collaborative and communicative tasks.

Though this study focused on each learner's results, other researchers attempted to examine the process from a sociocultural perspective. Swain and Lapkin (2002) described how two grade seven French immersion students performed a jigsaw task through collaborative dialogue. After the students discussed the task, they wrote a text about the story based on the dialogue. A native speaker reformulated the students' writing and they compared the differences between their original text and the reformulated text collaboratively. They reviewed the dialogue of their comparing activity viewing a recorded video. Finally, they wrote individually and solved linguistic problems collaboratively. Language usage improvements were validated by the comparisons of the language-related episodes in the pre- and post-tests.

Storch (2002) examined 33 students aged 19 to 42 years old in an Australian university writing course. Students participated in three kinds of tasks in the same self-selected pairs: writing a short composition, editing the composition, and reconstructing it. Storch analyzed the patterns of dyadic interactions for a semester. The pairs were classified and compared afterwards according to the pairings of high and low equality and mutuality. She concluded that the collaborative pairing (high equality/high mutuality) indicated more instances of language development than other pairings.

Foster and Ohta (2005) included two separate data samples for their study: a group of 20 young adults who were studying intermediate level English in the UK and 19 university students

studying Japanese in the US. They worked on similar information exchange tasks in dyads and several triads in the language classes. They audio-recorded their dialogues under usual class conditions and transcribed the first five-minutes of a conversation. The researchers analyzed the transcriptions focusing on the outcomes which were supposed to have been produced by individual cognitive mechanism through NfM. They introduced the notion of NfM defined by Long (1980). Three components of his NfM are: comprehension checks, which are used to check the interlocutor's comprehension; confirmation checks, which are utilized to confirm the speaker's own understanding about the former interlocutor's speech; and clarification requests, which are used to ask for an explanation about the interlocutor's speech. Moreover, they anatomized the peer assistance in the conversational process, which was regarded to disclose collaborative learning operation from the sociocultural perspective. They classified the peer assistance into three sub-ordinate elements: co-construction, self-correction, and continuers. According to their definition, "co-construction is the joint creation of an utterance," self-correction "occurs when learner corrects his or her own utterance," and continuers "function to express and interlocutor's interest in what the speaker is saying" (pp. 420-421). They concluded that the interactional process, which includes NfM and peer assistance, offers learners opportunities to improve and gain access to the language and make their learning successful.

Methodology

Participants

Participants were first-year nursing students who had studied English for six years or more. The study was performed in two courses: a compulsory English course in the first semester (from April to July) and the elective English course in the second se-



mester (from October to February). Each course had one or two classes per week for 15 weeks. In the first semester, 81 students out of 85 gave permission to use the data, and 32 students out of 36 cooperated in the second semester for use in this study. The students' permission and the students' anonymity have been respected and pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper. Collaborative dialogues between nursing students provided qualitative and quantitative data, which was gathered and analyzed to comprehend development in their language use.

Tasks

According to the needs analysis, students preferred English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The nursing students, as freshmen, however, had little knowledge about their major, therefore, ESP topics were arranged for the second semester. Four general topics were chosen for the first semester: three things about me; if I had a million dollars; hobbies and interests; and family, friends, and teachers. The second semester topics included hand-washing, blood pressure, oral care, and AED (Automated External Defibrillator).

TBLT model

The tasks used in the courses were based on Willis' (1996) TBLT model, which has three phases: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus.

Pre-task

In this preparatory period, students studied model dialogues, topical vocabulary, and communication strategies. Communication strategies taught to encourage active communication, included simple helpful expressions (See Table 1) such as "Really?" "Pardon me?" and "Oh, that's great!"

Then they were given some conversation starter questions such as "What would you do if you had million dollars?" or "How is hand-washing in your daily life different from the nurses' style?"

Table 1. Communication strategies

Semester	Month	Instructed communication strategies
1st semester	June	Really! Really? Pardon me? Oh, that's great! How about you?
	June	How are you? How are you doing? Great! Terrific! Fine! OK. Not bad. Nice talking with you. Thank you. Bye! See you.
	July	What does that mean? I know. Sounds good! Are you kidding? Me too! Me neither!
	July	Who ...? What ...? Where ...? When ...? Why ...? How ...?
2nd semester	October	Let me see ... Let me think ... I know what you mean. <i>Shadowing*</i>
	November	Review (Really! Really? Pardon me? Oh, that's great! How about you? Let me see ... Let me think ...)
	November	Review (What does that mean? I know. Sounds good! Are you kidding? Me too! Me neither!)
	December	Review (Who...? What...? Where...? When...? How...? Why...? <i>Shadowing*</i>)

**Shadowing*: a strategic repeating of the interlocutor's words or sentences.

Task cycle

After students received pre-task input, they proceeded into the second phase and began conversations in pairs starting from the beginning questions. They exchanged their ideas answering the beginning questions, asked follow-up questions, and answered



each other. They changed partners more than 20 times and had collaborative dialogues with many classmates. In the third week, they made pairs randomly again and audio-recorded their dialogue about the topic.

Language focus

In this stage students focused on their language spoken during the task cycle through the transcription of their audio-recorded conversation. During and after the transcription exercise they had opportunities to notice their language mistakes and to discuss if their meaning was understood by their partners. They also evaluated their learning attitude by themselves.

Data collection: quantitative data

Speaking tests

Students took speaking tests at the end of each course in July and December. Two teachers, a native English-speaking teacher and myself, a Japanese teacher of English, evaluated them. The evaluation was based on the modified version of Sato and Takahashi's (2008) rubric. According to their rubric, fluency and content of the dialogue was emphasized, although accuracy, delivery, and conversation strategies were also evaluated (See Table 2).

Table 2. Rubric for speaking tests

Criteria	Points (full marks: 20)	description and rating
Fluency and content	10	Be able to maintain a 5-minute conversation fluently, with good content
	7	Be able to maintain a 5-minute conversation with some silence, with adequate content
	4	Be able to maintain a 5-minute conversation with some silence, with poor content
	1	Be hardly able to maintain a 5-minute conversation with some long silences
Accuracy (grammar and pronunciation)	3	Be able to communicate with accuracy
	2	Be able to communicate with some errors
	1	Communicate with many errors, using mainly key words
Delivery (volume and eye contact)	3	Be able to speak with good volume and eye contact
	2	Occasionally speak with adequate volume and eye contact
	1	Be hardly able to speak with adequate volume and eye contact
Strategies (conversation strategies and follow-up questions)	4	Be able to use many conversation strategies and follow-up questions
	3	Be able to use some conversation strategies and follow up questions
	2	Use a few conversation strategies and follow-up questions
	1	Be hardly able to use conversation strategies and follow-up questions



General surveys

Twenty questions in Japanese were asked in July and 25 questions in December in the last class of second semester. Five questions were added in the second semester to ask whether nursing topics were challenging or not and which nursing topics were more attractive for students. They answered by selecting yes (5), probably yes (4), not sure (3), probably no (2), or no (1). The surveys at the end of each course had 19 questions in common concerning conversation practices in the course and their resulting averages were compared (See Appendix 1).

Ability perception survey

Students were asked in more detail about whether they felt they had improved in speaking and writing in a third survey which was investigated once after the two courses. Concerning students' perception of their speaking ability, they answered two questions about speaking: how many minutes they could speak in April when the first semester started, and how many minutes in December, with choices from almost none (1) to smoothly without notes for five minutes (5).

Data collection: qualitative data

Analysis of selected students' conversations

The conversations of two students who had improved the most and the least were selected to investigate. Their conversations were analyzed referring to Foster and Ohta (2005). Investigating a pair of learners whose levels represented the high and the low extremes in speaking tests may illustrate the learning process or learning-promotion factors.

Final report

Students reviewed their learning activity and outcomes at the end of the two courses. They were allowed to write anything about the courses in Japanese: their attitude toward the courses, pleasant or unpleasant things in the classes, and their improvement in English. Data of the speaking tests, general surveys, ability perception survey, analysis of selected students' conversations, and each student's final report were collected thus, and the results were as follows.

Results

Quantitative Results

Speaking Tests

The average of the first speaking test scores in the first semester was 8.13 (n=32), which significantly improved to 10.95 at the second speaking test ($t(31) = 2.92, P < .01$) in the second semester.

Ability perception survey

In April, although there was one student who reported "I could speak for three minutes smoothly without notes," others could not speak for three minutes without notes, and nine students reported "I could speak almost none," whereas in December, half of the students reported that they could barely speak for three minutes without notes and it was only one student who reported "I can speak almost none" (See Figure 1). The mode moved from "barely for three minutes with notes" to "barely for three minutes without notes" after the TBLT classes.



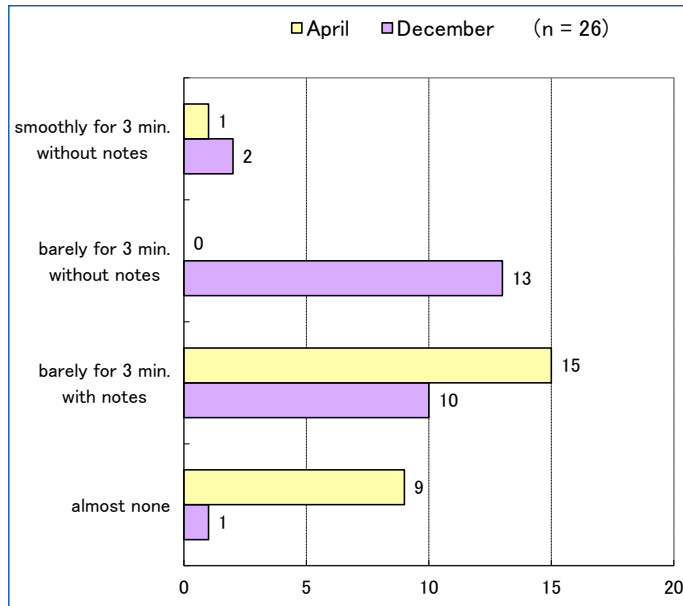


Figure 1. I can speak...

General surveys: increased items

The averages of student answers increased in ten out of the 19 common questions between July and December. Some significantly positive changes were in answers about getting accustomed to speaking English, the quality of conversation, and the quantity of conversation (See Figure 2). Students thought their ability in writing and speaking improved and they were becoming used to speaking English after two courses.

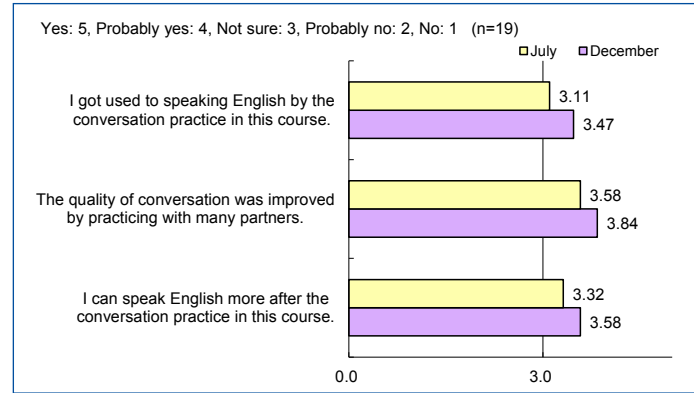


Figure 2. The results of surveys—increased resolve

General surveys: decreased items

In nine of the 19 questions the students' answer averages decreased, reflecting a more pessimistic attitude toward learning the target language. The changes indicate retrogression though the lowest was 3.42, which was higher than the mean point 3.0. With ESP in the second semester, learners were more afraid of making mistakes, enjoyed the conversation less, understood partners' English less, depended on their first language more, and used communication strategies less than with English for General Purposes (EGP) in the first semester (See Figure 3).

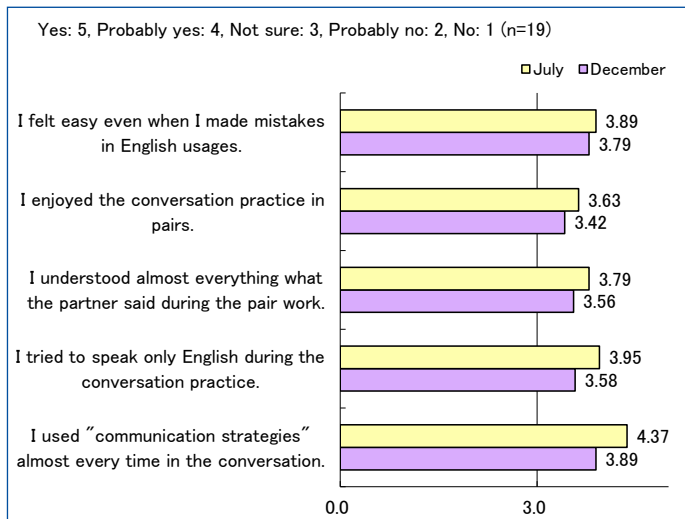


Figure 3. Results of surveys—decreased resolve

Qualitative Results

Analysis of selected students' conversations

The student who improved least was Arisa (pseudonyms are used to protect student identity). Here dialogues in the last class of both semesters are analyzed. The following is an example of a dialogue with Haruno in December, which shows how each speech is analyzed. The italicized terms in the conversations are analyzed as signs of NfM and peer assistance referring to definitions referred to by Foster and Ohta (2005).

Arisa: How about you? ← *continuer*

Haruno: I was very careful about too tight or too loose...

when I take blood pressure.

Arisa: I know. ← *continuer*

Haruno: Next question OK?

Arisa: Sure. ← *continuer*

Haruno: What mistakes can give inaccurate readings?

Arisa: I think stethoscope is wrong...

Haruno: Put on stethoscope... ← *assistance*

Arisa: (Nodding).

Haruno: OK. I understand. ← *continuer*

Emika was the student who improved the most throughout the two courses. The following is a dialogue with Kanta in December.

Kanta: What mistakes can give inaccurate readings?

Emika: OK. ← *continuer* Miss position ste... stetho...scope stethoscope. ← *self-correction* So the sound of stethoscope no... no... heard. No heard.

Kanta: No. ← *continuer*

Emika: Miss position, no heard. ← *comprehension check*

Kanta: No... ← *continuer*

Emika: No. ← *continuer*

Kanta: *Dokkun, dokkun, (Japanese onomatopoeia for throbbing)* no, no, no, no. ← *continuer*

Entire dialogues of Arisa and Emika in July and December were analyzed and compared (See Table 3, Table 4, and Table 5).



Table 3. Conversation analysis of focal students (July)

	NfMs			peer assistance			
	Total AS-units	Comprehension checks	Confirmation checks	Clarification requests	Assistance (co-construction & other-correction)	Self-correction	Continuer
Student whose grade improved the least (Arisa*)	23	0	2	0	0	0	5
Student whose grade improved the most (Emika*)	38	0	0	0	0	3	18

*Students' names are pseudonyms.

Table 4. Conversation analysis of focal students (December)

	NfMs			peer assistance			
	Total AS-units	Comprehension checks	Confirmation checks	Clarification requests	Assistance (co-construction & other-correction)	Self-correction	Continuer
Student whose grade improved the least Arisa*)	29	0	1	1	0	0	17
Student whose grade improved the most (Emika*)	52	9	4	0	2	3	17

*Students' names are pseudonyms.

Table 5. Conversation analysis of focal students

	Focused student	Total of AS-unit	Total of NfMs	Total of peer assistance
July	Arisa*	23	2	5
	Emika*	38	0	21
December	Arisa	29	2	17
	Emika	52	13	22

*Students' names are pseudonyms.

Final report

Arisa's final report: Arisa wrote the following remark at the end of the two courses.



Eventually, I was able to write without looking at the handouts. And I could understand how to use communication strategies more and more. I was worried that I might be a problem for my partner. I hated being recorded on video. I was so stressed and I did not know what to do. But I could ask my partner when I could not understand.

Emika's final report: Emika wrote the following remark at the end of the two courses.

I felt I was making progress when I could (speak) without referring to notes. I only thought of answering the questions the first or second time. But I got used to speaking and asking additional questions, by using more communication strategies. By thinking about the answers to the questions of each topic, I could get a deeper understanding of my nursing study.

Both Arisa and Emika felt that they could speak more confidently and asked questions if necessary. The video-recording was a stress factor for Arisa. Emika was able to incorporate her understanding with her other studies.

Discussion

TBLT: Perceptions and engagement

Quantitatively analyzed surveys indicated that the average improvement of students' answers suggest that students perceived TBLT as beneficial after both EGP and ESP courses. The decreased averages of survey answers, however, reflected a negative perception in the ESP classes. They perceived TBLT affirmatively and engaged positively though they were relaxed and enjoyed more in EGP than in ESP according to the surveys. In addition, ability perception survey data support the students' confidence of improvement in speaking skills through courses conducted in TBLT.

TBLT and speaking skills

Speaking tests indicate students' improvement in English speaking. Furthermore, the results gained by analyzing NfM and peer assistance in the students' conversation show qualitative improvement. The student who improved the most increased to 13 NfM from none, though the student who improved least had no increase in the use of NfM. Therefore the best student interacted more with her partner, which led to activation of internalization and language learning. These changes corresponded with the results of speaking tests, with which the results of peer assistance did not agree. The development of peer assistance might be a potential factor of improvement in speaking. The improvement of the best student followed the frequent appearance of peer assistance. The poorest student, however, could not interact well as the result of NfM analysis suggests. Yet she improved her peer assistance, which may eventually lead to NfM.

Conclusions

From the discussion, three conclusions can be made: first, these TBLT courses demonstrated that students improved their speaking skills through collaborative dialogues. The tasks were performed collaboratively in every class and most students reported that they had recognized their improvement. When TBLT was properly applied, even nursing students, not focused on learning English, benefited both in perceived ability and in real language learning. Second, the transition of occurrences from peer assistance to NfM in a student's conversations could support the hypothesis that speaking ability succeeds peer assistance and NfM admitting that more data are necessary to be examined. Finally, students did not appreciate or enjoy ESP as much as hoped. Their response proved a decrease in resolve and may warrant further investigation. For example, restructuring the course with more relevant topics and opportunities to expand their ideas collaboratively deserves further examination.



Based on results from this study, an issue for future study could be how the occurrences of peer assistance and NfM change in large data, which might clarify the importance of peer assistance for language learning. Moreover, when and how to incorporate topics related to ESP, which would motivate non-English major nursing students, might also be a prospective subject.

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Appendix I

Common questions from the two general surveys

- 1 I enjoyed the conversation practice in pairs.
- 2 I did not feel embarrassed even when I made mistakes in English usages.
- 3 I tried not to speak Japanese during the conversation practice.
- 4 I understood almost everything what the partner said during the pair work.
- 5 The quality of conversation was improved by practicing with many partners.
- 6 I used "conversation strategies" almost every time in the conversation.
- 7 I understand mistakes we often make by learning "common mistakes."
- 8 I did the homework of writing to prepare for the conversation practice.
- 9 It was not difficult to write English as homework.
- 10 It was not difficult to talk in pairs if the writing is prepared well.
- 11 The recording in pair was effective for reflection.
- 12 I got used to speaking English by the conversation practice in this course.
- 13 I can speak English more after the conversation practice in this course.
- 14 My English speaking ability will improve if I continue this kind of practice.
- 15 My English listening ability will improve if I continue this kind of practice.
- 16 My English writing will improve if I continue this kind of practice.
- 17 My English reading will improve if I continue this kind of practice.
- 18 I'd like the topics relevant to nursing if they are not difficult.
- 19 I'd like the topics relevant to nursing even if they are difficult.



