Using Language Teaching History to Advocate Task-Based Teaching

Shirley Leane
Tottori University

Reference Data:
Leane, S. (2014). Using language teaching history to advocate task-based teaching. In N. Sonda & A. Krause (Eds.), *JALT2013 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Some teachers new to Japan are faced with a dilemma: They are here to teach English, but have qualifications in an unrelated field. The aim of this paper is to promote task-based language teaching as an effective pedagogy for all teachers, but especially for such new teachers. A brief overview of the three main philosophies of education and how they have influenced language teaching precedes a discussion of how the advantages of each philosophy fit with task-based teaching. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2011) has expressed concern that the 2003 action plan to "cultivate Japanese with English abilities" was not successful and declared, "in order to cultivate . . . communication skills, classes must be shifted . . . toward student-centred language activities" (p. 3). I argue that task-based learning can be used to fulfil these goals.

日本に来て間もない英語教師の中には、持っている資格が無関係な分野のものだというジレンマを抱える人もいる。　この論文の主目的はタスクに基づいた教授法を広める事にあるが、それは、英語教育一般だけでなく、このような経験の少ない先生方に特に役に立つだろう。ここではまず三つの教育哲学についてざっと述べ、それぞれが言語教育にどのような影響を与えたか論ずる。次に、それぞれの哲学の長所がどのようにタスクに基づいた教授法に当てはまるか考察する。最後に日本の文脈において、タスクを使うことの意味について考えてみたい。文科省 (2011) はその「英語が使える日本人の育成」の2003年度実施計画があまり効果をあげていないことを懸念しており、「コミュニケーション能力を養うためには、学生中心の言語活動に移行させる必要がある(p.3)」と指摘している。この論文ではタスクを中心とした学びが、文科省のこの目標を達成するのに役立つと論ずる。

Every year people come to Japan to teach English. Some come as part of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program and others work for private language schools. Many have no teaching background, but they do have youth and enthusiasm in abundance. These teachers often face a dilemma when it comes to preparing their own lessons; they are enthusiastic, they want to make a difference, and they want to have good lessons that motivate students, but they do not know where to start.

When I first started teaching it seemed logical that students first needed to learn the basics of grammar, vocabulary, and spelling, and that only after they were equipped with this knowledge would they have the skills to communicate. Krashen (2004) called this the Skill-Building Hypothesis and argued that the hypothesis is built on the assumption that "only after hard and tedious work do [students] earn the right to actually enjoy the use of language" (p. 3), a belief that seems to fit well with the Japanese idea that the best measure of diligence is

"the effort one makes" and the amount of time one spends on it (Steger, 2006, p. 199). Rote learning of numerous grammar rules is hard work, so according to this theory it must be a good learning experience for students. However, Krashen believed the theory to be incorrect. He called skill building "the 'common sense' folk theory of language development," and went on to say that even if "it is used in nearly all foreign and second language classes," this still does not make it a good theory (Krashen, 2004, p. 5).

Understanding why the skill-building hypothesis is wrong is akin to understanding world politics. Just as a look at the history of Japan-China relations is needed to help us better understand the Senkaku Islands problem, a look at the history of language teaching will help us better understand present-day ideas about language learning. In this paper I will first give a summary of three main philosophies of education that have influenced language teaching and then use the strengths of each to advocate task-based learning.

Three Philosophies of Education

As ideas about education in general have changed, so has the thinking about how languages should be taught. Skilbeck (1982) and Clark (1987) proposed that the evolution of foreign language teaching is related to general trends in education. Moreover, Clark identified three broad educational philosophies that have influenced teaching: classical humanism, reconstructionism, and progressivism.

Classical Humanism

Classical humanism is based on the assumption that the teacher is the expert and knows all. It has been the "dominant philosophy underlying the history of the Western education system for centuries, derived from theories of knowledge going back to Aristotle and Plato" (Finney, 2002, p. 71), and it was internationally prominent until the mid-20th century (Mitchell, 2009).

The classical humanist syllabus is content oriented and analyses language in separate parts, focusing on grammar and vocabulary. Students are expected to master the rules of the language and use this knowledge to translate texts. Classical humanist methodology emphasizes conscious study and deliberate learning (Scarino, Vale, McKay, & Clark, 1988) and requires students to memorize grammar rules and vocabulary (Richards & Rodgers, 2010). This style of teaching is often referred to as the grammar-translation method.

Assessment within this model is norm referenced; there are many tests, and all students do the same exam. On norm-referenced tests, students are compared with each other and are ranked from top to bottom of the class, school, or even the entire nation. These tests are often used to stream classes or for "selecting learners for the next level of education" and students' test results are seen not only as a measure of their achievement in that subject but also as a measure of their intellectual ability (Scarino et al., 1988, p. 12).

Classical humanism does have some advantages over the other philosophies and some students may, in fact, prefer this style of learning. Cowie (2007) pointed out that a "key Japanese cultural belief is that learners need to be persistent in their efforts to master a language, or indeed any skill" (p. 250). Hence students may feel reassured by the difficulty of lessons based on classical humanist ideas.

Another advantage is that learning vocabulary and grammar "gives students a sense of accomplishment; they feel that they are making progress . . . . Students have something almost tangible to hold onto as they tally, for example, the number of vocabulary items that they have learned in a given week" (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 7). This is important for beginning learners. They may not be able to communicate in the new language but

being able to measure their improvement or achievement gives them energy and motivation to continue studying.

There are some serious disadvantages to classical humanism though. Tests are often multiple-choice or short answer, so they do not provide any information about what students can actually *do* in the language. As pointed out by Nunan (2004), "It is generally accepted that language is more than a set of grammatical rules, with attendant sets of vocabulary, to be memorized. . . . Learning is no longer seen simply as a process of habit formation" (pp. 6-7). Students need more than just rote learning of rules. Norm-referenced tests, which rank the students against each other, mean there is little or no indication of what students can or cannot do in the language. The tests only provide data about how a particular student has performed in relation to other students in the group (Scarino et al., 1988).

In short, classical humanism does not take into account the abilities of students or the complexities of the learning process. Moreover, the strong emphasis on written language and conscious application of rules means students do not develop an ability to communicate in the language. It was this lack of ability to communicate that helped lead to the emergence of reconstructionism.

Reconstructionism

Reconstructionism recognizes the importance of the social uses of language, and communicative language ability is promoted. Rather than outlining the grammar and vocabulary items that should be taught, syllabuses are written from a functional viewpoint, stating what the students can do in the language (Scarino et al., 1988). The content of courses is based on student needs and themes; topics and functions (of language use) are added to the syllabus to reflect students' communicative goals. Skills and levels of language knowledge are clearly spelled out in the curriculum.

Under the influence of reconstructionism, language learning is seen as a way of breaking down national barriers and improving intercultural and international understanding (Finney, 2002), which is an important consideration in our present era of globalization. The value of reconstructionism can be clearly seen by its influence on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR; Mitchell, 2009). The CEFR outlines the communicative situations that learners may face, and has clear descriptions of what they should be able to *do* in the language. Reconstructionist syllabuses are goal oriented and describe the intended learning outcomes of a course. Teachers and students can easily understand what is expected of them, and evaluation of courses is easier because "where there are clearly specified objectives, the success of the learners . . . can easily and accurately be evaluated" (Finney, 2002, p. 72). Teachers know what they are aiming for, objectives are written in a way that guides assessment planning, and these ideas are carried over into task-based teaching.

Reconstructionism is an improvement on classical humanism, but there are still problems. Audiolingualism, one form of reconstructionism, uses lots of drills and exercises to demonstrate sentence structure and vocabulary, with the idea that good language habits are learnt through repetition. The strongest criticism of this teaching style is that it "reduces people to the level of automatons who can be trained to behave in particular ways and precludes such concepts as autonomy, self-fulfilment and personal development" (Kelly, 1989, cited in Finney, 2002, p. 72). Repetition and drills can also destroy student motivation as endless repetition soon becomes boring.

Another form of reconstructionism, termed situational English, has students rehearse various situations such as getting a meal or asking for directions. The main focus of these lessons is on students conveying meaning, and grammar is not considered

important. Rehearsals and role-plays can be a problem because they do not prepare students for the unpredictability of everyday communication, but a more serious fault with reconstructionism is the lack of grammar teaching (Scarino et al., 1988).

Despite the fact that reconstructionism provided a useful corrective to some of the problems of classical humanism, namely a focus on the social uses of language and a consideration of the students' learning needs, there was too much focus on defined skills and proficiency levels, and this led to progressivism.

Progressivism

Progressivism is concerned with the development of the individual learner as a whole person, fostering autonomy and increasing the capacity to learn. According to Finney (2002) progressivism is "concerned with the development of understanding, not just the passive reception of knowledge, or the acquisition of specific skills" (p. 73), and as with reconstructionism, syllabus design is based on learner needs and interests.

Progressivism has many advantages. Lessons are designed so that students find things out for themselves and learn through being actively involved in communicative activities. At the same time students are challenged to use new language and also to develop learning-how-to-learn skills, through tasks that enable them to use the context to infer the meaning of parts they do not understand (Scarino et al., 1988). Under the influence of progressivism, the beginnings of task-based teaching are becoming more evident. Another advantage is that errors are now considered to be a natural part of learning and students are encouraged to learn by experimenting with language. Students have control of the order in which the learning occurs as well as the language that is learnt. They learn from the feedback they receive and there is no expectation for immediate accuracy. Progressivism allows for individual variation and there are often no predetermined goals, with the aim of encouraging students to be more creative and less afraid to make mistakes. Students are able to negotiate their assignments with their teachers, and individual achievement is highlighted; achievement is not related to the grades of other students.

Researchers have identified disadvantages of progressivism in that some students develop an interlanguage with which they can make themselves understood and as a result do not sense any need to improve. Consequently, their grammar skills cease to develop. One learner, even though he was competent at communicating in English, developed fossilized grammar mistakes "and no improvement was seen [in his grammar competency] despite extensive opportunities to use English" (Schmidt, 1981, cited in Leane & Stephens, 2013, p. 90). Progressivism also suffers from a lack of educational accountability; teachers are not satisfied, students are not satisfied, and there is a problem with learner motivation in foreign language settings (Scarino et al., 1988).

In short, each philosophy has weaknesses, but at the same time, they all have strengths, which is why they all continue to inform educational practice today. The advantages are summarized in Table 1.

Task-Based Language Teaching

Before explaining how the advantages in Table 1 can be used to advocate task-based language teaching, it is important to define what is meant by task-based language teaching (TBLT; Willis, 1996). TBLT is based on the premise that "the most effective way to teach a language is by engaging learners in real language use in the classroom" (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 1). Early promoters of this approach focused on defining what a task is. For example, Nunan (1989) stated that a task "is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than form" (p. 10).

Table 1. Pedagogical Advantages of the Three Philosophies

Educational Philosophy	Advantages
Classical Humanism	1. Successful learning of vocabulary and grammar can give beginning students a sense of achievement.
Reconstructionism	1. Student needs are taken into consideration when planning syllabuses. 2. Syllabuses are goal oriented. 3. Social uses of language are important.
Progressivism	1. Students learn through being actively involved in communicative activities. 2. Students learn at their own rate. 3. Students can negotiate their assignments. 4. Students are given feedback to guide them with their learning. 5. There is no expectation of immediate accuracy. Errors are allowed. 6. Students develop learning-how-to-learn skills.

More recently, though, researchers have focused more on what happens in task-based learning (TBL) situations. Ellis (2003) remarked that TBL engages any, or all, of the four language skills and requires students to communicate effectively in order to achieve the desired outcome. They have to think and work out how they can use their language knowledge to convey the necessary information. Basically, TBL requires the students to *use* their new language to *do* something. Students are not asked to focus on a particular grammar point; rather, the main focus is on completing the task. Moreover, good language learning tasks will "above all [provide] an intellectual challenge for students . . . appeal to students' imagination and expand their interests" (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009, p. 46). Tasks that appeal to students' imagination and creativity are an effective way to learn a new language. Figure 1 shows examples of tasks suitable for use in junior high classes.

- Blow up balloons. Write greetings on the balloons.
- Make a small picture book:
  - I like... - I don't like...
  Illustrate each page with pictures.
- Make an autograph book and ask their friends, teachers and parents to write something in English.
- Fill in the speech bubbles in a comic strip.
- As part of a unit on sports: In groups, prepare a set of domino cards based on the theme of sport (with pictures on one half of the card, and writing on the other).
- As part of a unit on geography: In pairs, draw a map of an imaginary island. Give the island a name, and label all its features.
- As part of a unit on music: Prepare a questionnaire, then interview classmates about their favourite music.
- As part of a unit on school: In groups, brainstorm what an ideal school would be like. Then make posters that illustrate their ideas; each student in the group choosing a separate theme for their poster (e.g. classrooms, subjects, teachers, school trips).
- Work in pairs to complete the story: If I had a magic wand...

Figure 1. Examples of tasks that can be used with junior high students.

Discussion

As noted earlier, all three of the major philosophies have distinct advantages that can be successfully blended together in task-based teaching.

Notwithstanding the fact that task-based lessons are more interesting and motivating for students, to be successful learners they still need to learn grammar rules as well as an enormous amount of vocabulary. Vocabulary study can be daunting, so teachers could effectively use ideas from classical humanism, such as regular small vocabulary tests, to encourage students. Classical humanism provides beginning students with an easy way to measure their progress and hence gives them a feeling of achievement as they successfully learn items of grammar and vocabulary.

The advantages of reconstructionism, as listed in Table 1, are covered by task-based teaching:

1. Consideration of student needs is closely linked to students' active involvement in the lessons. If their needs and interests are carefully considered, they are more likely to be actively involved in the task.
2. Task-based syllabuses are definitely goal oriented. The task instructions make it clear to the students what the outcome should be, plus, as already mentioned, clear goals and objectives make it easy for teachers to assess the students.
3. Tasks done in pairs or groups are by nature social. With limited language skills, however, junior high school students, in particular, are apt to revert to Japanese. One way around this is to carefully construct the tasks and guide students with social phrases such as, "What do you think?" "I want to . . ." and "How about . . .?"

It is also clear that task-based teaching covers the essential components of progressivism:

1. Tasks are by definition communicative and actively involve students in the lesson. Students also gain a sense of achievement when they have completed a task.
2. Students can plan their own work schedule and decide for themselves how they wish to present their completed task.
3. Within a broad general framework, students can make decisions and negotiate the finer details of each task. For example, when they are planning an imaginary island there is enormous variety within each class regarding the shape and features of the island. Some may choose to make the whole island a theme park, but others may plan the island as a place where their family and friends can live and work. They also have lots of fun naming the features on the island.
4. Students receive feedback from other students and the teacher. Displaying posters on the wall outside the classroom is one effective way to generate peer feedback. Another way is to share written assignments around the class and ask students to write comments to each other regarding the content and quality of the writing. With junior high students the comments are, by necessity, short because of their limited language abilities, but they are still appreciated by the recipients.
5. In TBL the students' attention is focused on the outcome of the task, not on the grammar they are using. Teachers set the guidelines, but students are expected to work out for themselves how to actually complete the task. This means they have to learn to "live with errors" and, at the same time, "learn from their errors" (Nunan, 2004, p. 66). An important advantage of students learning to live with errors is that it helps dispel "one of the enduring myths about grammar . . . that there is always one right way to convey a particular meaning" (Larsen-Freeman, 2003, p. 59).

6. Sharing or displaying examples of completed tasks enables students to see what others have done and helps them to make more effective decisions the next time they do a similar task. The process of planning, negotiating, and carrying out the task helps students develop learning-how-to-learn skills. They have to make decisions about the finer details of how they will complete their task.

Misunderstandings of Task-Based Teaching

TBLT has been criticized for avoiding explicit teaching of language forms. For example, Sato (2009) expressed concern that task-based lessons do not provide opportunities for language practice. This may have been true for early forms of communicative language teaching, but tasks are usually followed by one or more form-focused exercises (Willis & Willis, 2007). Scarino and Liddicoat (2009), for instance, in their guide *Teaching and Learning Languages* written for the Australian government, allay Sato's concern. They asserted that students need both knowledge *about* the language plus skills to *use it* for communication, and further emphasized that "task-based language teaching shifted the focus of language learning from knowledge of language to a focus on its use to achieve communicative purposes" (p. 45). Scarino and Liddicoat agreed that a focus on form (i.e., grammar and vocabulary) is needed to develop accuracy, but the main focus in lessons should be on tasks that build on or extend previous learning and promote ongoing learning. Nation and Chung (2011) also negated the assumption that task-based teaching shuns the teaching of language forms by stressing the need for language-focused learning within a task-based syllabus.

Rather than relying on grammar-translation to teach the language forms, teachers can help students focus on language by encouraging them to keep a record of their learning and ways to do this include:

- keeping a portfolio of expressions they have learnt,
- making their own dictionary and adding new words each day,
- using flashcards to help memorize new vocabulary, and
- reviewing what they have learnt at the end of each lesson.

MEXT and Future Directions for English Education in Japan

Even teachers who recognize the value of task-based teaching feel constrained because "students need grammar-translation to prepare for entrance exams, particularly for high status universities such as Kyoto University, which use complicated translation questions" (N. Nakada, personal communication, 21 May 2014). In response to such perceptions, Willis and Willis (2007) argued that task-based lessons can adequately prepare students for these types of exams, but they also stressed the importance of following the tasks with mock tests to ensure students gain an understanding of the test style and exam procedures.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), concerned about this perceived pressure on teachers, claimed "some schools are reported to [be still focusing] on grammar-translation learning, or on preparation for entrance exams to senior high schools or universities" (MEXT, 2011, p. 4). Using the phrase *some schools* does not reveal how widespread this practice is, but at least there is recognition that there is a discrepancy between MEXT course guidelines and what is actually happening in classrooms. MEXT acknowledged the problems teachers face:

> English entrance exams in universities do not always aim at English skills required by the global community including speaking ability. The entrance exams must be modified so as to involve not only listening and reading skills

> stipulated by the Courses of Study but also speaking and writing, with all the four skills tested at (*sic*) proper balance. (p. 12)

The report also stated, "in order to stimulate students' motivation for English learning, it is most important to use educational materials based on actual English usage" (MEXT, 2011, p. 6), and "an experience of using English as a means of communication brings about pleasure and self-confidence, thus enhancing motivation for English learning" (p. 7). Statements such as these make it appear that MEXT is aiming to promote task-based teaching.

The recently released *Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization* (MEXT, 2014) announced that over the next 6 years MEXT will promote educational reform, aiming, by 2020, for senior high school students to have the "ability to understand abstract contents (*sic*) for a wide range of topics and the ability to fluently communicate with English speaking persons" (p. 1). They also want university entrance exams to assess all four skills. The Japanese government is obviously aiming for a huge improvement in students' communicative abilities before the start of the 2020 Olympics, and this will entail many changes to the way English is presently taught. Task-based teaching, with its focus on both communication skills and language knowledge, would be an efficient way for teachers to satisfy the MEXT guidelines.

Conclusion

MEXT has recognized that globalization, in combination with the upcoming 2020 Olympics, has increased the need for students to be able to use English for authentic communication. Task-based teaching is an effective way to incorporate the best aspects of the three major educational philosophies, help Japanese students become more proficient, and at the same time fulfil MEXT's goals.

Even though there is no such thing as an *ideal* curriculum, in this paper I have argued that task-based language teaching takes into account the main advantages of each of the three main philosophies of education. Tasks allow students a certain amount of freedom of choice in their language learning; they learn at their own rate, they know what the expected end product is, they have some flexibility to negotiate assignments and finally, they gain a sense of achievement after successful completion of a task. Task-based learning also helps students become more comfortable with errors, resulting in increased confidence to communicate.

Bio Data

Shirley Leane is Assistant Professor at Tottori University. Her main interests are in teacher training and student motivation. She has taught students from over 30 different countries and strongly believes that given the same learning environment, Japanese students are no different than students of other nationalities.

References

Clark, J. (1987). *Curriculum renewal in school foreign language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cowie, N. (2007). Gambaru: Japanese students' learning persistence. In K. Bradford-Watts (Ed.), *JALT2006 Conference Proceedings* (pp. 249-254). Tokyo: JALT.

Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Finney, D. (2002). The ELT curriculum: A flexible model for a changing world. In J. C. Richards & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice* (pp. 69-79). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Krashen, S. (2004). Why support a delayed gratification approach to language education? *The Language Teacher*, *28*(7), 3-7. Tokyo: JALT.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2003). *Teaching language: From grammar to grammaring*. Boston, MA: Thomson-Heinle.

Leane, S., & Stephens, M. (2014). Supplementing the teaching of grammar. In *Tottori University Education Center Journal*, *19*, 89-93.

MEXT. (2011). *Five proposals and specific measures for developing proficiency in English for international communication* (provisional translation). Retrieved from http://www.mext.go.jp/component/english/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2012/07/09/1319707_1.pdf

MEXT. (2014). *English education reform plan corresponding to globalization*. Retrieved from http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics/1343591.htm

Mitchell, R. (2009). Foreign language teaching and educational policy. In K. Knapp & B. Seidlhofer (Eds.), *Handbook of foreign language communication and learning* (pp. 79-108). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Nation, P., & Chung, T. (2011). Teaching and testing vocabulary. In M. H. Long & C. J. Doughty (Eds.), *The handbook of language teaching* (pp. 543-559). West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nunan, D. (2004). *Task-based language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. (2010). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (2nd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sato, R. (2009). Suggestions for creating approaches suitable to the Japanese EFL environment. *The Language Teacher, 33*(9), 11-14. Tokyo: JALT.

Scarino, A., Vale, D., McKay, P., & Clark, J. (1988). *Syllabus development and programming: Australian language levels guidelines, Book 2*. Canberra, Australia: Curriculum Development Centre.

Scarino, A., & Liddicoat, A. J. (2009). *Teaching and learning languages: A guide*. Carlton: Australian Government Curriculum Corporation.

Skilbeck, M. (1982). Three educational ideologies. In T. Horton & P. Raggatt (Eds.), *Challenge and change in the curriculum* (pp. 28-41). Sevenoaks, UK: Hodder and Stoughton.

Steger, B. (2006). Sleeping through class to success. *Time and Society*. *15*, 197-214. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0961463X06066952

Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning*. Harlow, UK: Longman Pearson Education.

Willis, D., & Willis. J. (2007). *Doing task-based teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.