

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and the Japanese English Classroom

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Abstract

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been in the spotlight in recent years in Japanese English education for its potential to promote language learning in communicative ways. The introduction of the new course of study by the MEXT (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology) in 2013 will necessitate changes in the teaching and learning of English. This paper views the following points: (1) definitions of TBLT and why it might be important for the Japanese EFL context, (2) what kinds of constraints may exist on TBLT in the Japanese EFL context in terms of careful overview of the Asian EFL context, and what TBLT approaches might be appropriate to develop students' communicative ability in English in Japan.

0. Introduction and Background: TBLT and The introduction of the New Course of Study

The introduction of the new course of study declared by MEXT (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology) in 2013 will necessitate changes in the teaching and learning of English. In order to make teaching and students' learning more effective and efficient, TBLT is considered to have the potential to promote language learning in communicative ways.

Various approaches, mostly based on task-supported teaching (a weaker version of task), have been advocated to implement communicative and task-based teaching in combination with grammar (form) teaching (e.g., Izumi 2009; Matsumura 2011; Muranoi 2006; Takashima 2005, 2011; Yokota 2011). These approaches are considered not as rejecting but as adapting rather than adopting TBLT in the classroom (Littlewood 2007: 245).

The purpose of this paper is to examine potential and practical ideas for how TBLT can be flexibly applied to the Japanese high school classroom by reviewing the following points: (1) definitions of TBLT and why TBLT might be important for the Japanese EFL context, (2) the kinds of constraints which exist on TBLT in the Japanese EFL context in terms of a careful overview of the Asian EFL context, and what TBLT approaches might be appropriate to develop students' communicative ability in English in Japan.

The national curriculum in Japan, The Course of Study, introduced "communication abilities" as the central premise in foreign language education in 1999 (Butler & Iino, 2005: 34). In the main objectives of the New Course of Study for 2013 declared by MEXT, there are three main

important notions as follows:

- (1) Emphasis is on learner-centered activities;
- (2) Grammar is a supplemental tool that supports communication;
- (3) English lessons using translation are deemphasized. (Ozeki 2010, 2011)

MEXT's objectives seem to be a response to one of the criticisms of the grammar-translation method for teaching English. Narawa (2006: 139) states "the grammar translation method focusing on reading and interpretation of English texts using Japanese is criticized as the main reason for Japanese students not being able to speak English in spite of six to eight years spent learning the language." The adaptation of TBLT has been encouraged as one possible method in the Japanese EFL context on the grounds that it's "a strong view of communicative language teaching" based on the ideas of focus on meaning and achievement of outcome, MEXT's in (2) above.

In commenting on the main notions in MEXT's course of study, Ozeki (2010, 2011) emphasizes that the classroom is the only place for students to get target input in the Japanese EFL context. Therefore, TBLT is probably one of the best ways for teachers to effectively integrate the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking in activities in English lessons, in accordance with the overall objectives of the New Course of Study.

1. What is TBLT?: General Principles of TBLT

1.0 Introduction

This paper investigates task and its possible adaptability to the Japanese EFL context and suggests that task-supported teaching may be more realistic than task-based teaching. This is based on theoretical research with a careful inquiry into various task definitions and SLA research. However, a multitude of definitions of a task have been offered so far, and "the definition of a task itself has been a matter of some debate" (Butler 2011: 38). Therefore it is necessary to interpret the definitions of task carefully and to find useful and clear definitions to apply and implement for instruction in the Japanese EFL context. According to the explanation by Fotos (2002), the theoretical assumption for task-based approaches is that interaction¹ is fundamental to language acquisition and that both learner comprehension and production play significant roles in interaction (Ellis, R. 1994, 1997; Nunan 1993). As Fotos (2002: 138) comments, "task can supply the learner with target language input that is rich in communicative usages of problematic target structures, and task performance provides opportunities for the type of learner interaction suggested to promote language acquisition; that is opportunities to produce the target language and receive feedback on the productions" (Foto 2002: 138). By receiving such feedback, "it enables learners to "notice the gap" between the target language they want to produce and the limitation of their current interlanguage" (Fotos 2002: 138, citing Carroll and Swain 1993; Kowal and Swain 1994; Swain and Lapkin 1998).

1.1 Discussions on the definitions of task

There are many common issues related to task definitions. Van den Branden (2006) interprets and divides various definitions of ‘task’ for two purposes: as language learning goals, and as an educational activity (see Table 1 and Table 2 below).

Table 1 Definitions of ‘task’ as language learning goals

Author	Definition
Long (1985)	A piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form ...In other words, by ‘task’ is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between. ‘Tasks’ are the things people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists.
Crookes(1986)	A piece of work or activity, usually with a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course, at work, or used to elicit data for research.
Bygate <i>et al.</i> (2001)	An activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.

(Source: Van den Branden 2006: 4)

According to definitions of ‘task’ as language learning goals, Van den Branden’s (2006) interpretation is: “a task is an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language” (Van den Branden 2006: 4). Among the definitions in Table 1, some stress that even though the goal that the learner aims to achieve need not be linguistic (e.g. painting a fence), the task needs language use for its performance (Van den Branden 2006: 3).

On the other hand, as educational activities, Van den Branden (2006) points out that there are emphases on “a close link between tasks performed by the learners in the language classroom and in the outside world” and “the primacy of meaning” (Van den Branden 2006: 6). He emphasizes that “the things learners do with the target language in the classroom (i.e., the classroom tasks) should be related to, or derived from, what the learners are supposed to be able to do with the target language in the real world (target tasks)” (Van den Branden 2006: 6). Besides, he points out, based on the belief that tasks can foster language acquisition, they are supposed to elicit the kinds of communicative behavior (such as the negotiation of meaning) that naturally arise from performing real-life language tasks (Van den Branden 2006: 9). Also, some of the definitions in Table 2 focus on the cognitive process, drawn by the meaningful use of language through some process of thought, and Van den Branden (2006) explains that this meaningful use of language will imply the establishment of relevant form-meaning mappings. Therefore the learner will need to manipulate and naturally pay (conscious or unconscious) attention to form.

Table 2 Definitions of ‘task’ as an educational activity

Author	Definition
Prabhu (1987)	An activity which requires learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought and which allows teachers to control and regulate that process was regarded as a task.
Nunan (1989)	A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than form.
Willis(1996)	Activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome.
Skehan(1998)	An activity in which: <ul style="list-style-type: none">●meaning is primary●learners are not given other people’s meanings to regurgitate,●there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities●task completion has some sort of priority,●the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.
Ellis(2003)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. A task is a workplan.2. A task involves a primary focus on meaning.3. A task involves real-world processes of language use.4. A task can involve any of the four language skills.5. A task engages cognitive processes.6. A task has a clearly defined communicative outcome.

(Source: Van den Branden 2006: 7-8)

According to Willis and Willis (2007), “the most complete definition is Skehan’s definition” (Willis and Willis 2007: 12). They explain, “Skehan includes meaning, and suggests that learners should be producing their own meanings, not simply regurgitating or repeating something that they have been told by someone else; it includes outcome by suggesting that task completion has priority; in other words, it is important to achieve an outcome, and it says that assessment of the activity should be seen in terms of outcome. Finally Skehan suggests that a classroom task should relate in some way to an activity in the real world” (Willis and Willis 2007: 12-13). Thus, “in the classroom language activity based on TBLT, tasks invite the learner to act primarily as a language *user*; and not a language *learner*” (Van den Branden 2006).

Ellis (2003) introduces the interpretation of Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) for a indication of task variety. Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001: 11) have rightly pointed out that “definitions of task will need to differ according to the purposes for which tasks are used”(Bygate, Skehan, and Swain 2001: 11). They suggest, for example, that “somewhat different definitions are needed for pedagogy and research and, further, that definitions will need to vary depending on what aspect of pedagogy or research” (Bygate, Skehan, and Swain 2001: 9). In addition to Ellis’s (2003) approval of Bygate, Skehan, and Swain’s indication of task variety and flexibility of its constitutions, Willis and Willis (2007) have suggested that task-like activities include the following features:

1. Does the activity engage learners’ interest?
2. Is there a primary focus on meaning?
3. Is there an outcome?
4. Is success judged in terms of outcome?

5. Is completion a priority?
6. Does the activity relate to real world activities?

(Willis and Willis 2007: 13).

These criteria give a clear idea for teachers when developing guidelines for designing task-like activities for the purpose of exposing learners to real language use with activities which can correspond to as many of these features as possible. It is also necessary to keep in mind that, as Edwards and Willis (2005) have indicated, “teachers who begin with the notion that tasks should be central to teaching then go on to refine an approach which fits their own classrooms and their own students” (Willis and Willis 2007: 1). In view of the EFL situation in Japan, the definitional concept of tasks must be interpreted, refined and arranged to be more accessible to both students and teachers. This means that, as Sato (2010) points out, “we need to take account of the Japanese EFL situation in which students do not have much exposure to English and have little need for communication in English in their daily lives” (Sato 2010: 191).

1.2 Strong and weaker versions: task-based teaching and task-supported teaching

In order to use task-based language teaching in the classroom for the purpose of making language teaching more communicative, by careful analysis of general principles and definitions of task, it is possible to place any definitions of task on a continuum from a strong version (*task-based teaching*; Willis 1996), to a weaker version (*task-supported teaching*; Ellis 2003), with consideration of the balance between meaning-focused activity and form-focused activity. Ellis (2003) introduces *task-supported language teaching* as “some methodologists have simply incorporated tasks into traditional language-based approaches to teaching” (Ellis 2003: 27), and *task-based teaching* as “others, more radically, have treated tasks as units of teaching in their own right and have designed whole courses around them” (Ellis 2003: 27). Carless (2009) revisits the TBLT versus P-P-P (Presentation-Practice-Production) debate in his paper, and he features the main characteristic of the division of TBLT by quoting comments by Ellis (2003) as, “Ellis (2003) acknowledges that TBLT is somewhat complex and suggests that the strong version of TBLT may be more theoretically desirable, while *task-supported teaching* is more likely acceptable to teachers” (Ellis 2003: 52). He adds that “in both cases, tasks have been implemented to make language teaching more communicative; therefore, tasks are an important feature of *Communicative Language Teaching* (CLT)” (Ellis 2003: 27).

Skehan (2009) divides task characteristics into strong and weak forms of the task-based approach. According to him, in a strong form of the task-based approach, “tasks should be the *unit* of language teaching, and in this view, the need to transact tasks is seen as adequate to drive forward language development, as though second language acquisition is the result of the same process of interaction as first language acquisition (cited in Wells 1985)” (Skehan 2009: 84), while a weaker form of task-based instruction would claim that “tasks are a vital part of language instruction, but they are embedded in a more complex pedagogic context” (Skehan 2009: 84). Therefore he points out that a weak form of task-based instruction may be preceded

by focused instruction which is dependent on task performance, and this version of task-based instruction is very close to general communicative language teaching (Skehan 2009). This also could be compatible with a traditional presentation, practice, production sequence (PPP), only with production based on tasks rather than more stilted and guided production activities (Littlewood 1981).

As far the choice of either approach, Butler (2011) explains, “a growing number of case studies have indicated that innovative approaches have been experimented with in various parts of Asia, especially in contexts where teachers have greater autonomy over the implementation of TBLT. These studies consistently emphasize the importance of having flexibility in implementing TBLT” (Butler 2011: 51). Therefore, it may be important to be flexible in choosing appropriate approaches in accordance with various EFL environments.

1.3 The framework of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)² : Common approaches to PPP and TBLT

A valuable framework which includes both the procedures of PPP and TBLT (including the strong versions and the weaker versions), is Littlewoods’s (1981) methodological framework for the communicative approach to foreign language teaching. This framework can guide implementation of TBLT in classrooms with different learning environments, different language learning purposes, and different language goals.

Littlewood (1981) makes a methodological distinction between *pre-communicative* and *communicative learning activities*. His diagram of this methodological framework can be represented as follows:

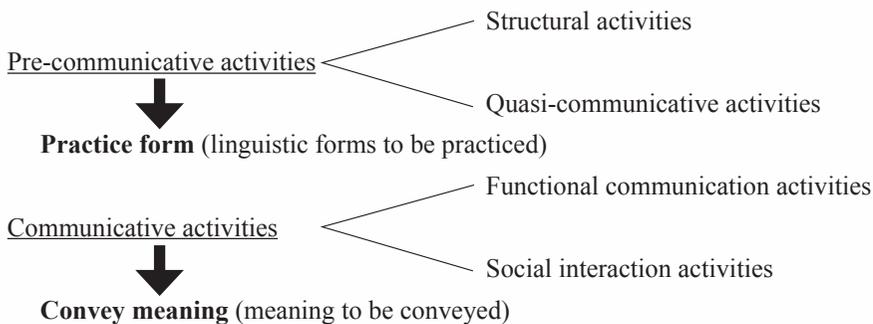


Chart 1. The methodological framework of CLT (Littlewood 1981: 86)

Of course, there is no clear dividing line in reality between these different categories and subcategories: they represent differences in emphasis and orientation rather than distinct divisions (Littlewood 1981: 86). He also notes that “the layout of the diagram in the previous paragraph does not necessarily show the *temporal sequencing* of such activities within a teaching unit”(Littlewood 1981: 87). He suggests the possibility of reversing this sequence;

namely, the teacher may *begin* a teaching unit with a communicative activity based on a situation on which the learners might expect to encounter (meaning-focused), and then the teacher moves back to the controlled practice of language forms (form-focused). He explains the benefits of doing this reverse sequencing of the activities as: “it enables the teacher to diagnose the learners’ weaknesses in a particular kind of communication situation, and it enables the learners themselves to become aware of their language needs and gaps in their knowledge. On the basis of his/her own diagnosis and perhaps after discussion with the learners, the teacher can organize controlled practice of language forms” (Littlewood 1981: 87-88).

This framework of CLT by Littlewood, including its flexible sequence in its methodology, is open to common approaches to PPP and TBLT. Butler (2011: 38) citing Skehan (2003), explains that the term *task* was increasingly used as a replacement for *communicative activity* during the 1980s, and in this respect, TBLT can be considered “an offset of CLT” (cited in Kumaravadivelu; 2006: 66). However, as reviewed in the previous chapter, the definition of a task has created debate among researchers, so it is important to note that adaptation of these methodological frameworks into the Japanese EFL context needs to be carefully and flexibly implemented.

1.4 Criticisms of TBLT

In spite of the increasing interest in TBLT over recent years, its efficiency and effectiveness in teaching forms have raised concerns among some teachers and researchers. For example, as one of the major problems that learners may face by engaging in TBLT, Sato (2010) points out that “the effectiveness of TBLT, especially in teaching grammar (form), can be questioned” (Sato 2010: 191). And Kess (1992) adds, learners (and native-speakers) will place a great deal of emphasis on communicating meanings, but not necessarily worry about the exact form that they use. According to Skehan (2009), task-based instruction itself makes meaning primary and obviously has considerable appeal in terms of authenticity and linkage with acquisitional accounts of the course of language development. “In native-speaker communication, there tends to be major emphasis on the satisfactoriness of the flow of the conversation, not on the correctness, or completeness (or the usefulness for interlanguage development amongst learners) of what is said” (Skehan 2009: 86).

In research on Canadian French immersion programmes, it was found that students failed to achieve high levels of performance in some aspects of French grammar, despite the great success immersion brought about in the development of students’ fluency and high levels of listening comprehension, confidence in use of their second language, and in academic subjects under content based language instruction (Harley and Swain 1984). In such situations as French immersion, which primarily focuses on meaning (content)-based language teaching, students can communicate satisfactorily with each other in spite of numerous errors in their speech, because the learners’ interlanguages are influenced by the same first language, the same learning environment, and the same limited contact with the target language outside the classroom

(Lightbown and Spada 2006: 156-157). Therefore, in recent years, proponents of content-based instruction have stressed the need to recall that content-based language teaching is still *language teaching* (Lightbown and Spada 2006: 160). So this example of immersion programmes shows how difficult it is to integrate meaning-focused and form (grammar)-focused instruction in TBLT.

Also, Butler (2005) points out problems with role play activities which are often used in TBLT, especially in EFL contexts. According to Butler's (2005) research, some teachers who are engaged in such role play activities expressed their concern that students often produce and memorize 'inaccurate' expressions during role plays; role plays can thus reinforce fossilization if they are not carefully planned and structured in EFL contexts.

A second problem, due to the task completion requirement in TBLT as one of the purposes for learners to engage in TBLT, Skehan (2009) points out that "it will teach learners how to do the tasks better, to proceduralize strategic solutions to problems, and to engage in lexicalized communication" (Skehan 2009: 87). This fact suggests that it is necessary "to derive methods of focusing on form without losing the value of tasks as realistic communicative motivators, and as opportunities to trigger acquisitional processes" (Skehan 2009: 87). Therefore, this problem inevitably relates to the issue of assessment criteria for tasks, such as whether linguistic performance, or task completion, or the two together should be determined as an assessment goal.

A third concern is, how task-based assessments can be implemented, especially in an exam culture (Hamp-Lyons 2007; Butler 2011). Many researchers (e.g., Carless 2007; Li, D. F. 1998; Littlewood 2007) take up this problem and show a serious concern for how to implement communicative tasks and task-based assessments in an exam culture where classic norm-referenced testing has exerted so much influence on teaching and learning practice (Butler 2011). Long and Crookes (1992) point out that in TBLT, assessment should be conducted "by way of task-based criterion-referenced test" (Long and Crookes 1992: 45). Willis and Willis (2007) suggest that *the Common European Framework (CEF)* can be used as a useful international recognition to see students' target-language level in terms of the language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) at a specified level, or *test tasks* which are like communication activities the test-takers will meet outside the classroom (e.g., reply to an e-mail, and so on). However, in such environments as an exam culture, syllabi and teaching methods are strongly influenced by the content of exams, so teachers often "feel powerless" over instructional and assessment-related decisions (Hamp-Lyons 2007: 498). Above all, Butler (2011) indicates that "a number of issues still remain to be solved, including how the assessment criteria are determined (e.g., linguistic performance vs. task-completion), how and by whom tasks are developed and/or selected to correspond to such criteria, and how and by whom student performance can be rated validly and reliably" (Butler; 2011: 46). She emphasizes that without empowering teachers to play a critical role in many of these processes, TBLT could end up merely as a policy slogan.

Lastly, it is necessary to keep in mind the complexity in understanding TBLT and the

difficulty of implementing it for teachers. Carless (2009), in his research on the TBLT vs P-P-P debate, indicates both the theoretical and practical complexities of TBLT implementation for teachers. Carless (2009: 62) discusses the fact that the range of grammatical options in TBLT may contribute to both flexibility and perceived complexity. He also indicates that “the different variations in TBLT provide potential for skillful teachers to access the most suitable options for a given teaching situation, but this may increase the complexity for less well-prepared teachers and accentuate the difficulty of clarifying what exactly TBLT means and involves (c.f., Littlewood 2004)” (Carless 2009: 63). Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to learn the principles of TBLT, its problems, how to implement it, and how to solve problems in order to resolve methodological issues and to understand the principles of SLA that derive/form the basis of TBLT. Such issues cannot be handled in only a weekend seminar or even in several weekend seminars. In order to overcome such limitations of teachers’ understanding of the principles behind it and the practice of TBLT, rather extensive teacher training and retraining will be necessary, as it will involve a radically different approach to, or view of teaching, learning and the role of the teachers.

2. TBLT and the Japanese high school classroom

Introduction

In this section, some possibilities for adapting a weaker version of task (*task-supported teaching*), PPP (Presentation–Practice–Production) approach, and *Focus on Form* are presented to deepen the understanding these types of teaching. By looking deeply into the Japanese EFL context and its educational background, insights into what learning problems might exist when implementing TBLT becomes clearer in this section.

2.1 Constraints on implementing TBLT in the Japanese EFL context

To apply TBLT effectively to the Japanese high school classroom, it will be necessary to interpret its concepts flexibly and to consider some constraints. Butler (2011) notes that one of the hindering factors of CLT³ is classroom-level constraints which include the lack of human resources and materials, structural challenges (e.g., large class sizes, limited number of instructional hours), and issues with classroom management (Butler 2011: 41). According to Butler (2005, 2011), Asian teachers have often found it difficult to choose meaningful materials that are appropriate for their students. Therefore, she points out that reliable and effective authentic assessments are still largely limited in number (Butler 2011: 41). As she emphasizes, it is important to keep in mind that the concept of authenticity is ambiguously understood in many Asian EFL contexts, and the Japanese EFL context is not an exception. Teaching materials and activities are perceived as authentic when they accurately reflect the actual use of language

and activities in English-speaking countries, and the content of these materials may or may not relate to Asian students' daily lives or correspond to the kinds of language that they would use in real communicative contexts as a means of global communication (Butler 2011: 42).

Also, Sato (2010) refers to the Japanese test-taking culture which mostly measures accurate grammatical and vocabulary knowledge of English. He emphasizes that there seems to be a mismatch between this situation and the kind of speaking-oriented communicative activities carried out in TBLT. In addition, Thornbury (2005) points out that too much pressure to be accurate and to avoid making humiliating errors makes Japanese students into overusers of the self-monitoring process. This keeps Japanese students away from acquiring communicative abilities through classroom activities.

Furthermore, a more serious problem Fotos (1994, 2002) points to is classroom management. "Task performance, with its noise from free talking within the group, shifting of chairs, moving around in the classroom, and so forth may not be regarded as a 'serious' educational activity by traditionally minded educators, or traditionally minded learners themselves, who are quite unused to a group participation pattern during study of required subjects" (Fotos 2002: 143). Foto (2002) suggests that the emphasis on the benefits of task performance is culturally related to Western instructional methodology, and these sorts of classroom participation patterns are not often accepted in the pedagogic activities of non-Western cultures.

Above all, Butler (2005) notes in her paper, and some of my students often tell me in class, that it is quite 'unrealistic' in the first place to have a conversation in a foreign language among people who already share the same first language. To sum up, successful implementation of TBLT in the Japanese EFL environment requires an adaptation to these constraints and difficulties.

2.2 Implementing CLT and TBLT in Asian classrooms: Littlewoods' (2007) five concerns

While CLT and TBLT have become officially widely adopted in Asian countries, a growing number of studies on secondary school education and college education in Asia have highlighted difficulties in implementing CLT and TBLT in classrooms (Butler 2005, 2011). In section 2.1, constraints on implementing TBLT especially in the Japanese EFL context were briefly explained, and in this section, according to Littlewood (2007), the five concerns reflecting the main areas of criticism in implementing CLT/TBLT in East Asian classrooms will be introduced. However, as Littlewood (2007) notes, "the experiences and concerns described should not be seen as exclusive to East Asian classrooms. They may be shared by teachers anywhere whose innovations diverge from the teacher-dominated, transmission-oriented pattern which has been so resilient in classrooms over the centuries" (cited in Watkins 2005: 8-12).

The five concerns reflecting the main areas of criticism in implementing CLT/TBLT expressed by Littlewood (2007) are as follows: classroom management, avoidance of English,

minimal demands on language competence, incompatibility with public assessment demands and conflict with educational values and traditions (Littlewood 2007: 244-245).

In classroom management, the concern mainly focuses on ways of controlling interaction in class. For example, a South Korean teacher quoted by Li, D. F. (1998: 691f) comments that with large classes, “it is very difficult for classroom management if we use the communicative method, for example, when everyone starts to talk, the class can be very noisy”. Also, a Mainland Chinese teacher interviewed by Li, C. Y. (2003: 76) expresses her frustration when she tries to organize communicative group work, “I’m very frustrated. Then I have to pull them back to grammar and exercises”, and, her comment is exactly what the writer of this paper has experienced when trying to ensure that everybody participates in group communication in an English class. In addition, performance-based assessments tend to be time-consuming in such large classrooms (Butler 2011: 42).

The second and third concerns – avoidance of English and minimal demands on language competence – are explained as “they reflect a perception that these activities often fail in any case to stimulate the rich use of the target language that is claimed by the proponents of the approaches” (Littlewood 2007: 244). Especially for students with low English proficiency there are factors preventing them from using English in communication activities. As Muranoi (2000) explains, citing Locshky and Bley-vroman’s (1993) argument, that “in most common information gap tasks, learners seem to be able to exchange information solely through the use of semantic- and pragmatic-based strategies combined with their background knowledge. Such tasks, then, may do more to develop strategic than linguistic competency” (Locshky and Bley-vroman 1993: 125-126). Muranoi (2000) notes, citing Skehan (1996b), that “this weakness of communicative tasks has led L2 researchers to recognize a need for incorporating form-focused treatments into instruction, that is, a need for “devising methods of focusing on form without losing the values of communication tasks as realistic communicative motivators, and as opportunities to trigger acquisitional processes” (Skehan 1996 b: 42).

Also, in many cases, “teachers themselves lack confidence to conduct communication activities in English because they feel that their own proficiency is not sufficient to engage in communication or deal with students’ unforeseen needs” (Littlewood 2007: 244). Ho (2004: 26) contends that teachers’ uncertain command of English is a factor which has hindered the introduction of communicative methods. About minimal demands on language competence, Careless (2004) points out that students may focus on completing the task to the extent that they “sometimes produce only the most modest linguistic output necessary to complete it” (Careless 2004: 643). Littlewood (2007) introduces one class observed by Careless (2004), in which students were able to complete an assigned survey task in silence, because they already knew most of the information required (Littlewood 2007: 245). According to Lee (2005: 199), many students in the South Korean classes he observed did not attempt to exploit their full language resources but produced language at only the minimum level of explicitness demanded by the task. Littlewood (2007) comments on such situations as rather than engaging in the negotiation of meaning predicted by the theories of TBLT, students were more inclined to use simple

strategies which made fewer language demands (such as guessing) (Littlewood 2007: 245). Also a phenomenon noted by both Lee and Careless is that the interaction was sometimes dominated by just one or two students.

The fourth and fifth concerns – incompatibility with public assessment demands and conflict with educational values and traditions – emphasize the external constraints which hinder the widespread use of activities associated with CLT and TBLT in East Asian educational systems. For example, according to Shim & Baik (2004: 246), teachers in South Korea are “caught between government recommendations on the one hand and the demands of students and parents for a more examination-oriented classroom instruction on the other”. Littlewood (2007) cites Gorsuch (2000), Samimy & Kobayashi (2004) and Butler & Iino (2005) to explain that “in Japan, the close association of English study with the university entrance examinations, which emphasize grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension/translation, means that students and teachers are less inclined to focus on communicative aspects of English”. Also in Hong Kong, according to Chow & Mok-Cheung (2004: 159), the “summative, norm-referenced, and knowledge-based orientation” of the high-stakes examinations are pointed out as a major obstacle to the implementation of a task-based curriculum. Littlewood (2007) admits that at a teacher seminar, several Hong Kong teachers confirmed that students’ and parents’ concerns about public examinations were among the main factors constraining their adaption of a task-based approach.

Apart from the practical concerns mentioned above, Littlewood points out that there is a question about whether the communicative approach is appropriate in countries with cultures of learning (Cortazzi and Jin 1996) which are different from Western settings where the approach was developed. For example, according to Hu’s (2005: 653) description, the traditional Chinese culture of learning as one in which “education is conceived more as a process of knowledge accumulation than as a process of using knowledge for immediate purpose” (Hu 2005: 653), and “the preferred model of teaching is a mimetic or epidemic one that emphasizes knowledge transmissions. Therefore, the classroom roles and learning strategies which this culture engenders conflict with a learner-centered methodology such as CLT but are highly supportive of a teacher-centered methodology” (Hu 2005: 653). Similar arguments are presented by Carless (2009) as “the majority of the teachers in Hong Kong reported their practices as being mainly P-P-P, with some TBLT, particularly in years 7 to 9, but less so in years 10 and 11 when examination preparation was paramount. Direct grammar instruction was reported as a major teacher priority, and TBLT was not seen as congruent with that goal” (Carless 2009: 55). With reference to Japan, Samimy & Kobayashi (2004: 253) refer to possible “cultural mismatches between theoretical underprintings of CLT and the Japanese culture of learning”, emphasizing in particular that the difficulties that might arise from the importance attached by CLT to process rather than content, its emphasis on meaning rather than form, and the different communication styles it entails. Therefore, it may be inevitable, as in the words of Li (1998), that “South Korea and other EFL countries with similar situations should attempt to adapt rather than adopt CLT into their English teaching” (Li 1998: 696).

2.3 *The weaker version (task-supported teaching) and P(present)-P(practice)-P(production)*

The Asian, especially, Japanese EFL context, as clarified in 2.1 and 2.2, is an input-scarce EFL environment and has almost no actual need for communication in English. A weaker version (*task-supported teaching*) can perhaps more realistically apply to the Japanese EFL context, because teachers have to use textbooks authorized by the Japanese government, and also its test-taking culture needs to be considered. Task-supported language teaching and P (present)-P (practice)-P (production) are reciprocally related teaching methodologies. According to Ellis's (2003) explanation, PPP and task-supported language teaching are as follows:

PPP refers to an approach to teaching involving the instructional sequence of ‘present’, ‘controlled practice’(by means of exercises), and ‘free production’ (by means of tasks). (Ellis 2003: 348)

Task-supported language teaching refers to a teaching method that utilizes tasks to provide free practice in the use of a specific linguistic feature that has been previously presented and practiced in exercises. (Ellis 2003: 351)

2.3.1 *PPP and Task*

Skehan (1996a) contrasts PPP (presentation-practice-production) as a traditional language teaching approach, and the task-based approach as meaning focused activities on an even flow of second language acquisition theory by means of ‘natural’ language learning processes, and a series of systems or interlanguages.

Table 3. PPP and TBLT

Instruction Purpose	PPP (Presentation-Practice-Production)	TBLT (Task-Based-Language-teaching)
Focus	Focus on form	Focus on meaning
Goal	Learner’s use of correct forms	Learner’s completion of tasks
Teachers’ role	Controller	Facilitator

(adapted form Aichi-Sougou Kyoiku Center Bulltin 2008)

According to the explanation by Harmer (2007), PPP has been taught to trainee teachers as a useful teaching procedure from the 1960s onwards (cited in Carless 2009: 51). The typical steps in PPP, as Byrne (1986) explains, are that the teacher *presents* new language items; the learners *practice* the items through drills, individual and choral repetition; and then *produce* the language for themselves, expressing what they want to say rather than what the teacher has directed them to say. PPP is considered an approach which “rigidly controls learners’ language” (“learners will learn what is taught in the order in which it is taught” (cited in Skehan (1996a)), and maintains the authority of the teacher. This is explained by Carless (2009), citing Skehan

(2003), that “it provides a clear teacher role, in accordance with power relations often found in classrooms” (Carless 2009: 51). Skehan (1996a) compares the two approaches:

A PPP approach looks on the learning process as learning a series of discrete items and then bringing these items together in communication to provide further practice and consolidation. *A task-based approach* sees the learning process as one of learning through doing – it is by primarily engaging in meaning that the learner’s system is encouraged to develop. (Skehan 1996a: 20)

Skehan (1989) criticizes PPP as it is claimed that most language learning based on this approach is associated with relative failure, saying only the gifted learners achieve impressive levels of proficiency. Therefore, instead of PPP, he advocates a task-based approach in terms of its role as the mechanism for classroom interaction which promotes language learning rapidly and efficiently.

According to Prabhu (1987), a key rationale for TBLT is that form is best acquired when the focus is on meaning. Following from this, Carless (2009: 51) emphasizes that the basis for TBLT in SLA theory has been well-articulated (Ellis 2003; Skehan 1996a). In addition, Long (1981, 1983) has put forth the Interaction Hypothesis and explained that negotiation of meaning provides comprehensible input, and in 1996, he added that negotiation of meaning can also contribute to acquisition in other ways, such as through feedback and recast by an interlocutor. This notion has deepened understanding for utilizing tasks as input for language acquisition.

2.3.2 Task methodology which fits the Japanese EFL context: Discussions on a weaker version (task- supported teaching) and P (present)-P (practice)- P (production)

One problem that has been suggested with the PPP approach in the Japanese classroom in general is that the last P (production) stage is not given enough time in classes in order for students to improve their communication (Sato 2010). In addition, according to Yamaoka (2005; 2006), if teachers put too much emphasis on only the mechanical activities in the second P (practice) stage without context, it is likely that this will not lead to learning. However, if the PPP approach is arranged to include more of a communicative component, it can still be valuable in the Japanese EFL context, even though the educational system is controlled by a central agency that determines the curriculum to be taught and the textbooks to be used (Muranoi, 2006). Takashima (2011) suggests that, as the last production stage of PPP, task activities as TSLT (Task-Supported Language Teaching) can be used. He explains TSLT (Task-Supported Language Teaching) can possibly be used in the Japanese EFL context, in which teachers need to present texts and materials according to approved textbooks, keep pace with the curriculum, give students time to practice, and lead them to the production of what they have learned. In this teaching process, TSLT can be naturally brought in either at the presentation stage or the production stage. Sato (2010) also advocates a revised PPP model, emphasizing that with PPP used as the primary approach for explicit presentation of instruction,

tasks can be effectively used in the third stage, the production stage (Sato 2010: 198).

Nishino (2011) notes that even though CLT is not effectively implemented in the Japanese EFL context, “classroom-English” and “Questions and answers” are the activities which are comparatively and frequently used compared to other communicative activities such as “discovering, identifying pictures” and so on. This is because teachers need to use the approved textbooks for reading and make communicative activities from the content of those textbooks. In this case, it is natural that the starting points will be that teachers ask students questions based on the content of the textbook, then explain the content in English, and urge students to ask questions in pairs. These sorts of textbook-based activities are recommended together with *Focus on Form*.

In addition, DeKeyser (2011) comments that PPP is a valid approach for the Japanese EFL context as long as the last P (production) stage is stretched out for the promotion of the skills for communication and automatization of learners’ target language (DeKeyser, personal communication, November 5, 2011). He explains that in his research, children learn language differently, namely, they implicitly learn very well, but on the other hand, learning is more explicit for adults and adolescents who need explicit explanation when they first encounter a foreign language. Adults and adolescents need explicit learning and also systematic practice for acquiring a second language. He also explains that the older the learners become, the higher-learning aptitude they need, because not all learners are created equal, in terms of age, aptitude, personality, motivation, previous educational experience and so on. In sum, he emphasizes that the PPP approach can provide learners with the explicit explanation, systematic practice, and promotion of the skills for communication and automatization of learners’ target language (DeKeyser, personal communication, November 5, 2011).

Also, Matsumura (2011) suggests that, as the first presentation stage of PPP, task activities can be used to mediate between what learners have already learned and what they are going to learn (task-mediated language teaching).

A revised PPP based approach: the presentation – comprehension – practice – production (PCPP) sequence (see the chart 2 below) has been put forth by Muranoi (2006). He argues that this more content-oriented approach (the contents and topics appear in the textbook) can effectively improve Japanese EFL students’ communicative abilities. He emphasizes its effectiveness in accordance with the cognitive approach⁴ to second language acquisition theory and the Japanese EFL context. Chart 2 shows his PCPP components in accordance with the cognitive approach to SLA theory.

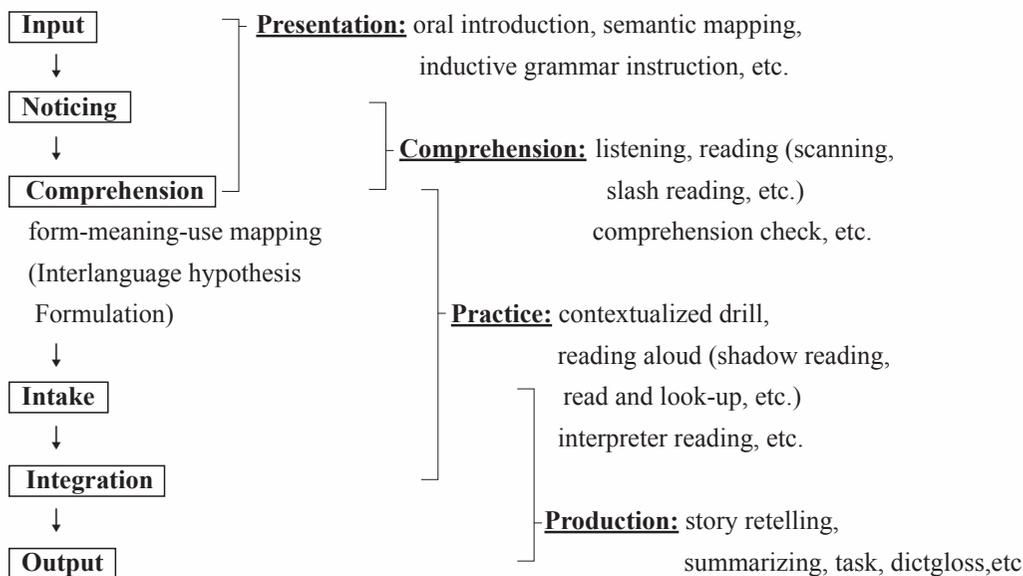


Chart 2. Muranoi's (2006) PCPP sequence (2006: 23)

In any case in regard to using TBLT or TSLT, students' needs for language learning need to be carefully considered and adapted into all teaching methodologies. Then it is important to choose any approach which can fulfill both students' needs for language learning and teachers' needs for choosing teaching methodologies from a practical and valid point of view. As Carless (2007) relates, from several case studies in Hong Kong, that teachers' experience and insights are key components for the potential adaptation of TBLT.

2.4 *Input or Output?*

Shirai (2012) points out that the quality and quantity of the input provided in the Japanese EFL classroom play a very important role in promoting learners' English communication ability, insisting on "plenty of input, with a little output" (Shirai 2012: 63, 73, 130). He notes that too much bias toward teaching only knowledge about English for many years has been hindering Japanese learners of English from developing communication ability and motivation to learn.

Also Shirai (2012) criticizes communicative activity which too much focuses on learners' output without giving them enough input in listening and reading. Since according to him, guessing from input is a form of communicative activity, and also it can possibly bring learners "tolerance of ambiguity"⁵, he emphasizes that as a first step, it is important to introduce sufficient English input through meaningful listening and/or reading tasks in the classroom and that input should be comprehensible for learners. Shirai (2012) explains that the Japanese EFL context is basically following the P-P-P (present, practice, produce) approach, but the last

production activity has not worked well. Therefore, it does not bring about automatization for learners and this is the main reason for Japanese students not being able to speak English in spite of many years spent learning the language.

As an appropriate teaching methodology, Shirai (2012) suggests that after giving students comprehensible input in a language learning situation with low anxiety, teachers can ask learners questions about the content of input and add extra linguistic information to them to promote their process of comprehension of input in listening and reading. This process is believed to connect to *intake*, which refers to, “for some researchers, the mental representation of perceived input; for other researchers, the process of assimilating the information into the learner’s interlanguage” (Loewen, S. and Reinders, H. 2011: 94). Then teachers can give students the opportunity to interact with each other by letting them use the input they possess (intake), in situations with low language anxiety. This approach seems to be appropriate for implementation of TBLT in the Japanese EFL context, especially with the constraints in that context such as class size, classroom management, and learners’ anxiety, all from low-TOA cultures⁵.

2.5 Focus on Form in TBLT

Van den Branden (2006) points out that “the marriage of meaning and form constitutes one of the key features of TBLT”, while Muranoi (2011) notes that learning the functions of any learned piece of language in addition to its form plays an important role in acquiring the target language. Both Ellis (2003) and Skehan (1998) insist that task designers should manipulate tasks in such a way as to enhance the probability that language learners will pay attention to particular aspects of the language code in the context of a meaningful activity, because this is believed to strongly promote second language acquisition (Van den Branden 2006: 9). Nunan (2004) explains that, while the status of grammar in the curriculum seemed rather uncertain for some time after the rise of CLT, there is also wide acceptance that a focus on form has a place in the classroom (Nunan 2004: 9). Namely, it is accepted that grammar is an essential resource in making meaning (Halliday 1994; Hammond and Darewianka 2001). Nunan (2004) notes, citing Long and Robinson (1998), that “at present, debate centres on the extent to which a grammar syllabus should be embedded in the curriculum (sic), some arguing that a focus on form should be an incidental activity in the communicative classroom” (Nunan 2004: 9).

As a result, “much of the recent literature on task-based language teaching explores how *Focus on Form* can optimally be integrated into task-based classroom work and discusses whether this should be accomplished implicitly or explicitly, during task performance, before or after it, and so on (Van den Branden 2006: 9).

According to Long and Robinson (1998), the definition of Focus on Form is as follows:

During an otherwise meaning-focused classroom lesson, focus on form often consists of an occasional shift to attention to linguistic code features – by the teacher and/or one or more students – triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production.

(Long and Robinson 1998: 23)

Most TBLT methodologists see the importance of form-focused instruction in TBLT (see for example, Skehan 2003) and, the main concern is “when and how best to incorporate form-focused instruction in TBLT” (Butler 2011). As it has been pointed out in the previous section, there are recommendations for implementing TBLT as TSLT in Asia (including the Japanese EFL context), which include some type of form-focused instruction or explicit instruction at the pretask stage, because of the students’ needs for explanation (such as in the requirement to use prescribed textbooks) (Butler 2011). Therefore, we need to look into fundamental questions as to what extent an adaptation of *Focus on Form* at the pretask or posttask stage can be effective, because such questions still remain unanswered. As one possible approach for integrating *Focus on Form* into TBLT, the next section suggests that task repetition be one of the options.

2.6 Task repetition

To compensate for the weakness of communicative tasks, which are under criticism for their lack of *Focus on Form*, task repetition has been attracting attention among several researchers⁶. There is an attempt to use task repetition for a focusing on form stage within a task circle⁷. Using task repetition as an immediate post-task activity to focus attention on form can be an effective way to focus learners’ attention on form when using a task-based approach (Hawkes 2012: 329). This is based on Bygate’s (1996) early study which showed the evidence of improved performance in a repeat task in terms of grammatical complexity and lexis (Hawkes 2012: 328). In addition, Goh and Burns (2012) note that “repetition could be carried out in various ways” (Goh and Burns 2012: 160). Goh and Burns (2012) put a stage for focusing on language/discourse/skills/strategies between first speaking tasks and second speaking tasks (task repetition) in their teaching-speaking cycle⁸. Then they explain that by repeating especially speaking task, “Learners have had a chance to analyze and practice selected language items or skills during the stage for focusing on language, and, therefore, have been able to apply this knowledge in order to enhance their performance” (Goh and Burns 2012: 160). As Bygate (1996) suggests, “previous experience of a specific task aids speakers to shift their attention from processing the message content to working on formulations of the message” (Bygate 1996: 144). This is revealed in the result of Hawkes’s (2012) study, which indicates that a shift of attention towards form occurred when learners repeated the task (Hawkes 2012: 334). Therefore, his study is meaningful in terms of task repetition as a useful way to direct learners’ attention from meaning to form. This study supports “the argument that a strong version of TBLT with no focus on form may not be enough for interlanguage development” (Hawkes 2012: 335).

3. Conclusion

Facing changes requires flexibility in accepting them. The Japanese EFL environment has faced a dynamic change: to foster learners' communication abilities in English. The issues surrounding task-based language teaching (TBLT) introduced in this paper have been attempted to pull together a lot of different topics related to the concept of "task" and to find an appropriate approach for bringing "task" into the Japanese EFL context.

In section 1, it was concluded that a weaker version of task (*task-supported teaching*) can perhaps more realistically apply to the Japanese EFL context since Japan is an input-scarce environment, and textbooks must be used which contain target grammar forms in each chapter, and given its test-taking culture.

In section 2, a variety of teaching language approaches including a weaker version of TBLT (*task-supported teaching*), PPP (Presentation-Practice-Production) approach, and Focus on Form have been introduced to look into the possibilities of adapting them effectively for the English language classroom in Japan. In order to adapt these approaches, it is important for teachers to realize that their roles are flexible in dealing with various teaching contexts to assist students to engage in meaningful activities. Also task repetition is presented to compensate for some of the weaknesses of communicative tasks, which are under criticism for lack of focus on form.

Overall, teachers need to learn the principles of TBLT, its problems, how to implement it, and how to solve problems in order to resolve methodological issues and to understand the principles of SLA that derive/form the basis of TBLT. In order to overcome such limitations of the teachers' understanding of the principles behind it and the practice of TBLT, rather extensive teacher training and retraining will be necessary, as it will involve a radically different approach/view of teaching, learning and the role of the teachers. Then, TBLT will work effectively in the Japanese EFL context.

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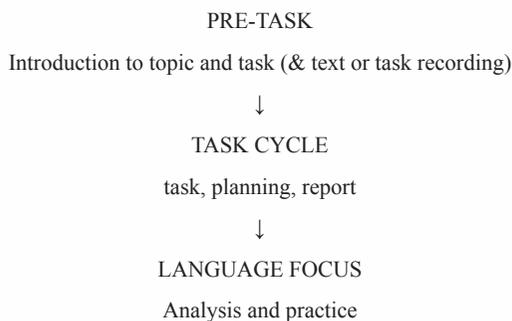
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1. "Interaction" has been central to theories of second language learning and pedagogy since the 1980s. Rivers (1987) defined the interactive perspective in language education: "Students achieve facility in *using* a language when their attention is focused on conveying and receiving authentic messages (that is, messages that contain information of interest to both speaker and listener in a situation of importance to both). This is "*interaction*" (Rivers, 1987: 4).
2. Richards & Rodgers (2001) explain that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) draws on several principles that formed part of the communicative language teaching movement from the 1980s, such as:
 - Activities that involve real communication are essential for language learning,
 - Activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning,
 - Language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process (Richards & Rodgers 2001: 223).
 Some of TBLT's proponents (e.g., Willis 1996) present it as a logical development of Communicative Language Teaching, and they claim that tasks are proposed as useful vehicles for applying these principles (Richards & Rodgers 2001: 223).
3. In this section CLT is used and cited as an example of methodologies for implementing language activity in

classroom.

4. The cognitive approach is an approach to second and foreign language teaching which was proposed in the 1960s and is based on the belief that language learning is a process which involves active mental processes and not simply the forming of habits.
5. In the research into cultural learning styles, one of the dimensions which is used to position one culture in relation to others is 'tolerance of ambiguity' (TOA) - the willingness of members of a culture to accept uncertainty, vagueness, and fuzziness (Lynch 2009: 86). According to Oxford (2002), cultures with a low TOA resort to rules and regulation to avoid uncertainty, while high-TOA cultures are open to change and taking risks. A key factor toward the effective implementation of CLT/ TBLT in Asian, especially, Japanese EFL contexts is surely based on the concept of fostering learners' TOA by providing abundant comprehensible input through classroom instruction. This might help learners engage in CLT/TBLT under the use of English-only instruction which is recommended by MEXT from the year 2013.
6. Hawkes (2011) citing Ellis's (2003: 258-262) suggestion, explains that post-task activities which focus on form to stimulate the development of complexity and accuracy, could include learner reflection on their performance, focusing on forms through noticing activities or conscious-raising tasks, or another possibility, task repetition (Hawkes 2011: 328).
7. Willis (1996) gives a summary task cycle diagram as follows (Willis 1996: 53, 60):



8. Goh and Burns (2012: 153) show the teaching-speaking cycle as follows (Goh and Burns 2012: 153):
 1. focus learners attention on speaking → 2. Provide input and/or guide planning → 3. Conduct speaking tasks → 4. focus on language/discourse/skills/strategies → 5. Repeat speaking tasks → 6. direct learners' reflection on learning → 7. Facilitate feedback on learning.