

Keeping it real

A discussion of task-based learning in Japanese Schools

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This article will discuss task-based learning in English classes in Japanese High Schools and Undergraduate classes at Junior Colleges and Universities. Task based learning (TBL) offers a different approach to teaching English that can be combined with more traditional methods. Proposals by the Japanese Government for all classes to be taught in English-only by 2013 will create a need for more exciting and motivating lessons that cannot contain any translations. This poses a problem for the linguistically challenged Japanese English teacher and the inexperienced native English teacher who will have no translation support in the classroom.

In the Japanese teacher's classroom, the work is normally taught and then tested, or tested, taught and then tested again. In the native teacher's classroom, the communication task is often presented, then practised, and then produced for the class or for the teacher. In both these cases the vocabulary, grammar and role play activity may be relevant to a scenario or topic but would be a derivative form of communication not elicited from the student, but rather manufactured from a text book unit.

A Third Way – Task based learning (TBL)

Willis and Willis in their book 'Doing Task-Based Learning' (2007), describes a way of teaching English through employing tasks based on a real-life situation but without a pre-prepared script to memorize. Students must think about how to complete the task with a set of pre-taught vocabulary, and perhaps a few grammatical phrases, but without any pre-ordering to the production of the language.

The goal of completing the task will inevitably produce situations in which students have to co-operate, explain, and query decisions. These interactions are where Willis describes the real 'consciousness raising' of the language use will take place. Students will see how their application of vocabulary and phrases into sentences can get a result or move the task on to a next stage. The

quality of the language production should not be penalised during the task, as long as the target language is being used. It should be possible to explain and feedback to students after the task is completed. Indeed, this approach does not contradict the lecturing and practise methods mentioned above, moreover, TBL provides a space for freedom to speak in communication classes that might be separate from learning just grammar and vocabulary. Therefore, this approach could fit into the current Japanese education system.

What about motivation?

If we consider the learning styles of Japan in particular, questions could be legitimately raised as to what tasks would be effective for students who are not surrounded by English, or any other foreign language. The need to motivate students in the production of 'free-form' language use is the key element of TBL's success. Examples of TBL in practise will be discussed below. Willis and Willis cite some examples of TBL using reading material in story retelling from one student to another or students having to interview their teacher in order to think on-the-spot. It may also benefit the teacher to try to ask the students where they use English the most outside of the classroom, or where they would use English the most if their thought their level was higher. The teacher would benefit from applying any feedback to a modified task that students could relate to and use again outside of the class, perhaps to report on after it had been done.

Public Sector and Private Schools use of TBL

The standard approach to English language education in Japan has followed the format of set grammar and vocabulary text books taught by a Japanese teacher individually and a communication based text book for the native English teacher to follow, with support from the Japanese teacher. For most public schools in Japan this is the structure of classes, which usually fit into a strict curricular regime along with all other subjects. The native English teacher is typically less involved in the activities of the school from day to day; and in rural areas may be working in a number of different schools during the same week. Therefore, the lack of chances to get to know and relate to students in any one school could reduce the chances of using TBL, especially if the school has little connection with international or exchange programs abroad.

In the private school sector, however, more flexibility in curriculum design and purpose for students' English use are possible. In crude terms, this could be because of the financial position of the school and the freedom from strong Board of Education controls. Private schools tend to offer programs from the English department that involve meeting foreign students, either in Japan or travelling to stay abroad. This provides greater possibilities for TBL as the motivational factors are clear and understandable to the students before the teacher plans the task. The following are examples of

task-based learning in a private high school. The grade levels are Junior High School 2nd grade at a beginner level, and at High School 2nd grade level of an International course. As discussed above, the need for motivation is the key to TBL working, and in the Japanese school system, a private high school may offer programs that allow students opportunities to use English in real life more than in the public sector.

Example One

A junior high school 2nd grade class had the opportunity to stay in New Zealand for two weeks, and each student stayed with a family and attended English classes, outdoor activities and met local school children. In preparation for the trip, the English teacher taught some basic phrases for the home stay situation and the airport as well as the doctor's office and at meal times. These were of the traditional dialogue repetition variety. In addition, the students were required to demonstrate 'origami' techniques to school children their age and instruct them in how to make various objects. This provided the teacher in Japan the opportunity to use TBL and provide students with a situation where English would have to be used flexibly in order to teach someone to make some origami. Only simple vocabulary and verb forms such as, right, left, fold, press, etc., were taught. In class one student or the teacher took the role of the New Zealand school student and the other students taught him how to make the object.

Example Two

A high school second grade class, returning from New Zealand, was required to produce a video for the school's website that promoted their international program. This meant planning, scripting, budgeting, shooting and editing the video over four to six weeks. The teacher would instruct the students in English on how to use video equipment but would not interfere with the production if not required to. The students were told to use English to produce the film. The task was made more relevant by the presence of one New Zealand student staying at the school for three months. His involvement in the production gave the Japanese students a greater need to use English as the instruction language to complete the task as the New Zealand student did not speak Japanese. The final project can be viewed as <http://www.masonsan.com/Video2.html>

As we can see from these two examples, the widening of opportunities for using English in real life situations will help TBL become a larger force in the curriculum planning for any Japanese school. With the development in new multimedia technology, contact with a world beyond the classroom has become more viable than ever before. Also, Japanese high schools could look at curricular that are purely or largely based on tasks. This final section will discuss the development of 'The International Baccalaureate Organisation' in some private Japanese high schools.

Widening TBL in Japan

The use of task based learning is at the heart of some teaching methodologies that are currently being tried in Japan. The International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO), originating from Switzerland in 1968, is one such method that involves all school subjects to investigate a 'meta-question', usually focused on a global issue affecting many countries. Each teacher is required to plan lessons around the central theme from the perspective of their subject and an overlap of two or more subject areas should be employed in the completion of a final project by students.

For example, if a central question to answer were 'What experiences do all young people share?' the biology department might look at the nutritional differences between two countries with differing poverty levels; the physical education department might look at the development of national sports by playing them in class. Therefore, this approach could lead the English teacher to create a task where students must find out information about young people by communicating with them over the internet or in face-to-face meetings with the goal of recording answers for a final project.

Conclusion

Whether or not the IBO is successful in Japan itself, the philosophy behind it does offer ways for schools to create a need for subjects, including English, to reflect a real world that currently is not open to many Japanese students. For English acquisition to be effective, students need to build on their skills month on month and year on year, however it is often the case that communication classes are not continued through the school cycle for some students. The need for learning based around real-life tasks and situations is paramount and should be a focus of any new changes to English language curricular in the future.

References

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