

Task Based Language Teaching at Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages

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Introduction

Most teachers at Kanda Institute of Foreign Languages (KIFL) are familiar with the Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) method of teaching English. This method is categorized as “focus on forms” (Ellis, 2009). In this method a grammatical structure is presented, then there are accuracy focused exercises for practice, and finally there is a production stage where students use the new grammatical structure in a real life situation to improve fluency (Harmer, 2009). This method is simple for teachers as they are able to logically plan for the class as the problems that may occur are predictable. However, the idea that bits of grammar can be introduced and practiced in a logical order does not reflect the complexity of language acquisition, minor errors do not prevent communication, and teacher intervention does not always have the desired effect (Thornbury, 1999). This essay aims to introduce Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as a complementary style of teaching which attempts to overcome these three problems.

What is TBLT

TBLT is a methodology which is categorized as “focus on form” (Long, 1991), and which refers to a method of teaching whereby learners' attention is focused on form

while completing communicative activities (Ellis, 2009). The goal of a TBLT lesson is for the students to complete a given task. A TBLT lesson can be divided into 4 sections: pre-task, task preparation, task realization and post task (Willis, 1996). In the pre-task section, the instructor, acting as facilitator, explores the topic with the group and highlights useful words and phrases. This could include brainstorming vocabulary, eliciting phrases or using materials to discuss the topic. The task preparation phase has been separated from the pre-task phase to ensure that learners are thoroughly prepared for the task (Curran, 2006). This stage should be more advanced than the pre-task phase, it may include planning a report, practicing a role-play, or writing a questionnaire. The task realization phase is what the previous phases have been leading up to. It should be a task set in a realistic environment. It could consist of a debate, a presentation or even a poster. The post task phase consists of two aspects; firstly, the facilitator must correct the mistakes which were observed in the task realization phase and secondly, the facilitator should ask for the reflections of the students, for example, by asking what the students feel they learned and what they would like to spend more time studying.

While teaching, it is very important that both the teacher and the students know the role of the teacher. A role is the shared expectation of how an individual is expected to behave (Dörnyei and Murphey, 2003). In an English classroom context this refers to the functions a teacher must fulfill, the level of control over how learning takes place, the degree of content control the teacher has and the pattern of interaction between the

teacher and students (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). In the more traditional PPP method of teaching, the teacher is the centre of the class. It is the teacher's role to choose the grammar to be practiced and to direct the student's behavior. However, in TBLT, the teacher plays a different role. TBLT considers teachers to be designers, facilitators and evaluators. This means that the teacher must plan the situation (designer), act as facilitator by setting up the task and helping students if they are unable to complete it, and give feedback (evaluator) (Choudhury, 2011). It is vital that both the students and teacher understand this difference.

Foundations of TBLT

The TBLT method of teaching is heavily based on the work of Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky argued that learning is fundamentally a socially mediated process that is organized by cultural artifacts, activities, and concepts (Ratner, 2002). This means that development takes place socially. This is key to remember since the PPP method tends to decontextualize language into pieces to be studied whereas task based learning emphasizes learning taking place in a social setting. To understand how Vygotsky's theories are relevant to language teaching, two key elements of Vygotsky's theory must be explained. These are the Zone of Proximal Development and scaffolding (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007).

For Vygotsky, a student's skills fall into three categories; skills which the students cannot perform, skills which the students may be able to perform, and skills which the students can perform with help (Murphy, 1997). Vygotsky was especially interested in the third category which he called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by

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independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). The term “facilitator” is commonly used to describe the “adult or more capable peer”. This definition highlights two of Vygotsky’s key themes; firstly, that cognitive development is a result of social activity, which then becomes the basis of intrapersonal functioning; and secondly, internalization, or the process by which cultural artifacts such as language, take on a psychological function. Vygotsky showed that learning in collaboration with others both shapes and precedes development, and that deliberately designed educational environments can create qualitative development changes (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). The guidance given by the facilitator during the learning process is known as scaffolding (Sawyer, 2006).

This theory is linked to TBLT in the following way. Firstly, the facilitator must choose a task within the learner’s ZPD, that is, a task which the learners will be able to realize with guidance. Secondly, the pre-task phases provide scaffolding to help the student realize the task. Then, during the task realization phase, the scaffolding is removed and the facilitator allows the learner to complete the task. Finally, in the post task phase the facilitator gives additional guidance.

TBLT Methods

There are a wide variety of tasks that a teacher may use in class. Common examples include; information gaps, problem solving, decision making and opinion exchange. An information gap task is a technique where students are missing information necessary to complete a task or solve a problem, and must communicate with their

classmates to fill in the gaps (Ellis, 2003). An example of this is where two students are given a spot-the-difference game where each student can only see one picture. They must describe the picture to find the differences. A problem solving task requires students to find a solution to an issue or dilemma introduced by the facilitator. For example, the lesson may be focused on problems on vacation. The students would be given a list of problems such as “You have lost your passport” or “The hotel is fully booked”, the students must then say what they would do. A common decision making task is “starting a business”. Student must decide what type of business they would start, where it would be, what the logo would look like, etc. An example of an opinion exchange exercise would be a debate between students. To distinguish between a task and a situational grammar exercise as used in PPP the following four conditions must be met:

1. “The primary focus should be on ‘meaning’ (by which is meant that learners should be mainly concerned with processing the semantic and pragmatic meaning of utterances).
2. There should be some kind of ‘gap’ (i.e. a need to convey information, to express an opinion or to infer meaning).
3. Learners should largely have to rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic) in order to complete the activity.
4. There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language (i.e. the language serves as the means for achieving the outcome, not as an end in its own right)”. (Ellis, 2009, p.223)

It is important to note the differences between a task and the production stage of a PPP lesson. The first difference is that a task focuses on meaning, whereas production
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focuses on accuracy. A task must have an information gap, whereas production may or may not have a gap. A task requires learners to use their own linguistic resources whereas production emphasizes the use of the target language. Finally, in a task the goal is to complete the task, in the production stage the goal is to use the target language.

Criticisms

There have been several complaints made against TBLT. I will outline three of these complaints and suggest methods to overcome them. The first complaint is that TBLT does not teach enough grammar. While it is true that TBLT places less emphasis on grammar than the PPP methodology, grammar is not ignored. A task can be focused or unfocused. An unfocused task may throw up any kind of vocabulary or grammar, but a focused task can elicit certain grammatical features by design and grammar can be studied in both the pre and post task phases (Ellis, 2009). It has also been argued that the theoretical rationale for TBLT is usually limited to grammar acquisition, and that vocabulary and phonology are neglected (Swan, 2005). However, this may be based on the idea that “focus on form” refers only to grammatical form, when in fact it refers to vocabulary and pronunciation as well. Another criticism of TBLT is that the quality of English practiced is poor (Seedhouse, 1999). However, for low level students, learning to use their limited vocabulary for communication can be a very useful exercise and for higher level students it is possible to elicit complex grammar and vocabulary with careful task design and well thought out pre-task activities (Ellis, 2009)

English Education in Japan

When teaching in Japan, a key concept to keep in mind is “Wa”. “Wa” roughly translates into English as harmony and is key to understanding classroom behavior. I will outline three methods Japanese people use to maintain harmony, and what this means for the teacher. These are “Aimai”, silence, and backchanneling. The first method is “Aimai” which means ambiguity. In Japanese culture “to express oneself distinctly carries the assumption that one’s partner knows nothing, so clear expression can be considered impolite” (Think Japan Blog, n.d.). In my experience this need for ambiguity means that classroom debates are very difficult to organize as nobody wants to contradict each other. Silence is generally considered the expression of a positive trait among Japanese. By taking a long time to answer a question it can show that you are thinking deeply, also by simply ignoring a question the chance of disagreement (which threatens harmony/”wa”) decreases (Cutrone, 2010). For English teachers, this means that, firstly, you need to learn to be more patient and, secondly, you should try to avoid topics that could cause students to worry about negative social evaluation.

The final method is backchanneling. Backchanneling refers to utterances such as “mmh” or “yes”. In English these utterances usually mean agreement, whereas in Japan they are used to express empathy. So when asked if they understand, a student will typically agree to be polite (Cutrone, 2010). For the teacher, this means that tasks that measure students understanding are vital for improvement.

The Japanese school system has students in elementary school for six years, junior high and high school for three years each, and university for four years. There are entrance exams for each new level of schooling. In an effort to improve the English level of Japanese students, in 2008, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture

introduced English lessons into elementary schools once a week for students aged 10 years old. (Aoki, 2016). At elementary school these lessons are formative but in junior and senior high school, passing written entrance exams is the priority so there is little focus on communication lessons. “They mainly study grammatical points to prepare for the university entrance examinations. It is very rare for high school students to have oral communication classes. They read textbooks, solve the questions in grammar books and write simple sentences following the pattern in the textbooks” (Ikegashira et al., 2009). Ikegashira et al. go on to explain that as well as having limited vocabulary and poor writing ability, Japanese students’ communicative ability is also very low.

TBLT and College Students

Students at KIFL are on academic or vocational courses. Those on academic courses generally wish to go on to study at university, while those on vocational courses typically wish to find employment after college. To allow students to achieve their goals of employment and university acceptance two goals must be achieved: a high TOEIC score and communicative competency. A high TOEIC score is important for job seekers as “According to an IICB survey conducted in 2013, about 70 percent of personnel management officials from 228 companies that use English in their business said they looked at applicants’ TOEIC scores when hiring” (Murai, 2016). It is also important for students who aim to go to university as the article goes on to say “The department of English at Tokyo’s Aoyama Gakuin University, for example, set TOEIC score of 730 or more as one of the qualifications for applying to its so-called self-recommendation admission”. Hymes (1972) defined communicative competence “not only as an inherent

grammatical competence but also as the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of communicative situations” (Bagaric & Djigunovic, 2007). Once accepted into a company or university, communicative competency is required to fulfill their job roles but the TOEIC test is a poor guide for communicative competency (Nicholson, 2015). It is therefore necessary that students have high TOEIC scores, which are best delivered by specific TOEIC classes and have a high level of communicative competence which can be delivered by TBLT.

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