Using Task Based Language Teaching Approach for Japanese College Students

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Abstract

This paper uses Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach to teach how to ask and reply to favors, which the students might face during their study abroad program. Language learning with context can result in higher understanding of the language use. Discussions and role plays can be used in real life situations by the students, thereby making their practice in class meaningful and context oriented. TBLT approach is ideal for classes where students have different language abilities. It helps the students to notice the gap and self-regulate their responses accordingly.

Key words: Controlled practice, noticing, roleplay, real life situations, self-regulation
Introduction

Globalization and advancement in technology has made it easier to interact and communicate with people across the globe. Moreover, students have multiple opportunities to learn language by participating in study abroad programs and learning the language through actual experiences. But this creates an added stress on the language teachers, to make the process of learning fun and provide the students with ample opportunities to be aware of the different situations and contexts they might encounter in real life situations. Therefore, there is a need of a teaching approach, which can not only help the students to learn the language forms, but also use it in different situations.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a part of communicative language teaching (CLT) which is based on the concept that students learn a second language through meaning-focused language use in different situations. These situations are part of tasks which students carry out in the same way as they would in the real-world (Ellis, 2003). Students learn by noticing gaps in their language knowledge through interactions. Ellis (2009) stated that there is no single task-based teaching approach, but a task must include the following four criteria: first, the primary focus of the task should be on meaning. Second, there should be some information gap in the task. Third, in order to perform the task, the learners should rely on their own resources. Fourth, there should be a clear, defined outcome apart from the use of language. This means that in the TBLT approach, focus should be on the negotiation of meaning rather than the form of the language used during the tasks (Bygate, 2001). Students must reach an outcome for the task (Skehan, 1998). The students do not receive any specific support on with their language use before or during the tasks.

TBLT approach to language learning is based on the premise that learners would become more efficient in language learning through solving real-life tasks. The student uses the target language for achieving a realistic goal at his/her current level. Tasks give the learner the opportunity to experiment with the language, and each task will provide the learner with new personal experience. However, for Asian students, it is observed that TBLT has challenges regarding the expectations for learning from students, teachers, and institutions (Lai, 2015). It is believed that in many parts of Asia, teaching is teacher-centred and grammar-based (Long, 2016). This makes student-centred TBLT difficult to implement in classrooms as the students may not be comfortable with a communicative approach being not accustomed to such learning styles.
Students may feel that without focused vocabulary and grammar exercises, they are not learning anything in communicative classes (Li, 1998). Furthermore, the purpose of learning a language may be to pass an exam (Li, 1998), thus the use of TBLT might be inefficient. Thus, it is important to check the needs of the students before using TBLT approach as the students might not be accustomed to such an approach and may not be able to take full advantage of it.

This paper will use TBLT based lesson plan to teach first year university students, who are preparing for home stay in America, on how to ask and reply to favors. Since it would be difficult to teach a standard set of replies for different situations students will face in America, discussions, practice, and role-plays would play an important role in the lesson plan.

**Literature Review**

Benson (2016) did an empirical study on fifty-three participants from different L1 backgrounds, who were low proficiency second language (L2) English learners and found that the tasks of similar type and complexity are transferable. This was an important study as transferability and generalizability are important component in TBLT approach, yet there are few empirical evidences that show task-related language abilities are transferable.

O’Connell (2015) conducted an examination of TBLT in the context of responding to the real-world needs of dealing with a police traffic stop. He presented students with authentic police inquiries: requesting documentation, querying immigration status, and issuing other police commands. The conclusion was that this approach fostered an attentive, enthusiastic classroom learner who was more motivated to learn because the communication tasks were both relevant and consequential.

Lambert, Kormos, and Minn (2017) examined the relationship between the repetition of oral monologue tasks and immediate gains in L2 fluency on thirty-two Japanese learners of English. The results showed that immediate aural-oral same task repetition resulted in gains in oral fluency which did not depend on proficiency level of the students or task type. Results for speech rate provide additional evidence for the beneficial effects task repetition on enhancing fluency.
Promnitz-Hayashi (2011) carried out a study on the effects of social networking on language instruction for 27 Japanese university students with a TOEFL range of 300-500. It was observed that students began to express more opinions and give extended reasoning in not only their face-to-face interactions, but also in their written class work. It was unclear whether social networking activities in isolation were responsible for the observed improvements, nevertheless, these kinds of opportunities and environments may create conditions for facilitating the development of learner autonomy.

Harris (2018) did a qualitative study of ten in-service teachers who use a task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach in foreign language classrooms in Japan. The teachers found that TBLT engages students, allows them to develop their creativity and autonomy, and frees them from constraints of the one correct way of using the L2 in language teaching.

Mackey (1999) conducted an empirical study on 34 adult ESL learners from different L1 backgrounds to find the relationship between conversational interaction and second language development. It provided direct empirical support for Long’s interaction hypothesis. The study concluded that interactional and negotiation of meaning led to development of second language.

TBLT approach has been shown to develop speaking skills and general language skills (Mackey, 1999), vocabulary acquisition (Newton, 2001), and motivation (Ellis, 2003) in the students.

**Methodology**

**Characteristics of Learners** The learners are first year Japanese college students who are preparing for a study abroad session in which they will spend six months in a foreign country studying English and doing an extended homestay with a local family. The age range is from 18 years to 19 years old. The class is made up of 18 students (6 males and 12 females). They are motivated to learn and use English but feel some anxiety about spending a long period of time in a foreign country. They have received 6 years of English Foreign Language Education in Japanese public junior high schools and high schools. The students do not have any prior experience going abroad and have no experience in interacting with foreigners.

**Communicative Needs Analysis** In living with a local family in a foreign country, each learner will have to engage in daily conversation in which they will discuss themselves and
also address their needs in daily life. Getting their point across quickly, with some degree of accuracy and appropriateness, will be essential during their study abroad session, with particular emphasis on the earliest days. Therefore, the lesson will focus on essential functions that will help the students communicate to others what they need to survive, build relationships, and gain confidence in their abilities to live in a foreign country for six months.

**Goals and Objectives** Students will be able to understand and convey their needs and desires to those around them such as host family, strangers, and shop staff through engaging in role plays with classmates acting as people in everyday life situations.

**Assessment and Feedback** Use of appropriate questions and responses. Maximum 2 grammatical errors are allowed. Verbal or written feedback is provided after the role-play is finished. If the language used during the role-play has more than 2 grammatical errors or inappropriate responses, the students will have to perform the task again.

**Activities and Materials**

The lesson is for 90 minutes, divided into seven parts. Please refer to Appendix A for the complete lesson plan. The following activities and materials will be used in the unit.

1. Guided Discovery for asking for help. This is the first phase of the lesson. The students are introduced to the concept of asking a favor. This helps the students to build knowledge of forms and grammar for asking favors.

2. Controlled Practice. (Appendix B) Handout A (examples of Asking a favor and grammar) is distributed. This is to practice phrases for asking a favor. The Academic Word List (AWL) vocabulary responding should be known to students due to previous study. The Off-List vocabulary **handout**, **dialogue**, and **homework** are all common classroom words and will be known to students.

3. Listening practice. (Appendix C) Two audio clips and Handout B (transcription of audio clips) are used. This is to help students build understanding of spoken language requests in interaction. The Off-List vocabulary **yeah**, **ok**, and **pasta** are all common words and will be known to students.

4. Discussion and writing memos. This is the pre-task planning phase. (Appendix D) Handout C (Making request situations) is used. This is to have students produce requests and accept/reject requests through interaction. They can write memos for
the dialogues as they will perform in front of the class. The AWL vocabulary assist should be known to students due to previous study. The Off-List vocabulary London, okay, bye, and favors are all common words and will be known to students. Paperwork is defined on the handout through an example.

5. 4/3/2 practice- This is the pre-task phase. Students speak for durations of three minutes, two minutes, and one minute while repeating the same information to a different partner for each decreasing amount of time. After three speaking turns are complete, the speakers and listeners switch roles.

6. Role play. This is the main task. The students perform in front of the class along with their pairs.

7. "Who am I?" quiz. This is the post-task phase. Teacher reads aloud his observations and snippets from the presentations performed by the students. The students were explicitly told about the quiz before the presentations began, as this serves three purposes; first, the students listen attentively to the presentations, which improves their listening skills. Second, it also provides an opportunity to the students to learn from the other students’ mistakes, and third, also helps review some of the lesson language.

Course Assessment The students in this course will have to participate in all activities and the teacher will be informally and formally assessing them at each stage. Within each lesson, the objectives will be assessed through roleplays, skits and other pair and group work. At the end of the course, each student should be able to ask Yes/No and wh- questions that will help them establish what they need to survive in role plays with the teacher that replicate meeting their host family using appropriate language with a maximum of 2 grammar errors, convey their needs and desires to those around them, and express their ideas, experiences, and desires to new friends, strangers, and host family in role plays with classmates simulating situations while studying abroad.

Discussion

One of the potential problems with the freedom in language use discussed above in relation to TBLT is that it creates a large amount of possible focuses for students within discussion tasks. Although such freedom in language use may promote noticing, consciousness raising,
and resultant SLA, it may also leave students confused about what content, actions, or language they should focus on within tasks (Burrows, 2008). But, to increase fluency, language learners must focus first on the message they want to convey, without concern for grammar. Such fluency activities are important as they are meaning focused (Nation & Newton, 2009), which is the main purpose of the lesson plan in this paper.

DeKeyser (2010) stated that repeated practice allows learners to develop form and meaning connections. Students, who lack grammar knowledge and proceduralized knowledge, were not even able to speak basic structures accurately, even at the end of the 6 weeks abroad program. Since the ultimate goals of second language (L2) learning is to attain fast, accurate, spontaneous, and effortless use of knowledge, it becomes a challenge for the teachers on how L2 learners’ practice schedules should be arranged.

Suzuki and DeKeyser (2017) conducted a study on distributed practice and massed practice for proceduralization of grammatical knowledge on L2 learners of Japanese. The results showed that both massed practice and distributed practice led to accurate utterances, but massed practice may lead to more rapid utterances than distributed practice. The most important aspect of the study is that practise is important to provide opportunities to the learners to practise the language so that they can automatize the knowledge.

Language production under time pressure also increases the students’ speed of production. As the fluency activity 4/3/2 (Nation, 1989), is typically the first major activity of each lesson, it provides a base to students to prepare for the role plays performed in front of the class. As Benson (2016) noted that the tasks of similar type and complexity are transferable, language used in one context can be transferred, in parts, to another context.

Asking a favor to host family has a similar real-world requirement as O’Connell (2015) study of dealing with a police traffic stop using TBLT. The repetition of task, as noted by Lambert et. al (2017) increases the speech rate of the students.

Though, use of technology and networking sites was not a part of this lesson plan, the students are encouraged to start communicating with their host families, in order to promote healthy relationship and break down communication gaps. As Promnitz-Hayashi (2011) noted, this will provide opportunities for facilitating the development of learner autonomy.
Conclusion

The lesson plan’s focus was to help the learners improve their ability to communicate with their host family during their home stay in America. After identifying a target task via a learner needs analysis, authentic samples of how to ask a favour was presented to the students, by identifying and making use of different contexts. Though, at the start of the lesson, the students’ attention was steered towards target forms, the final production was more focused towards students successfully being able to convey their intended meaning across, under different contexts. The assessment’s main purpose was to help the students identify their mistakes through interactions, practice, and production via different tasks. Needs analysis to identify language-use situations that are relevant to learners is important as this prevents dependence on intuition or imagination.

The design of the lesson plan aims to help learners at the novice-high to intermediate-low levels feel better prepared and more confident in their ability to survive the rigors of daily life in a foreign country while doing a homestay. The lesson and task sequence selected are immediately applicable to their current needs and in many cases can carry over into other contexts. The limited amount of structures that were selected for each function should provide enough language to meet their needs while not being overly burdensome. Hopefully, the students who participate in these lessons will have a pleasant and meaningful study abroad experience that will allow them to feel confident in their abilities to survive in other multicultural settings in the future.
References


Appendix A

Lesson Plan

Grade- First year college students.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:-

1. Understand and make the make requests.
2. Respond to requests correctly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time and Materials</th>
<th>Activities/Teacher's guides</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 minutes</td>
<td><strong>Activity 1 (Controlled practice of asking favor)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>[whole class]</td>
<td>1) Get Ss in pairs and give them 2-3 minutes to see and play around with the forms. This will help them to notice patterns and understand the rules inductively. 2) Then ask the pairs to try using the form among themselves and check if they can use the form appropriately. 3) Walk around and provide feedback to students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher lecture</td>
<td><strong>Activity 2 (Listening to audio clips)</strong></td>
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<td>1) Let the students listen to the audio clips one by one. If required, play the audio clips again. 2) After every audio clip played, ask the Ss to discuss in pairs of what they could understand/ register from the clips. 3) First, the teacher asks the students to say the English phrases/words which they heard in the audio clips. 3) Then, the teacher elicits meaning from the Ss in L1.</td>
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<td>10 minutes [in groups] Pre-task planning</td>
<td>Activity 3 (Discuss and write)</td>
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<td>1) Distribute handouts (Handout C). The handouts contain situations such as:</td>
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<td>Ask your partner to ...</td>
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<td></td>
<td>● loan you $50 for the weekend</td>
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<td></td>
<td>● help you with your homework</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2) Ss must discuss and write dialogues which contains the use of target language. The task is done in pairs, and the speaker must include greeting, asking favor etc. in the task.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3) The teacher walks around, listens to the Ss conversation and provides feedback (if required).</td>
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| 20 minutes 4/3/2 practice Pre-task phase. | 1. Students speak for durations of three minutes, two minutes, and one minute while repeating the same information to a different partner for each decreasing amount of time. After three speaking turns are complete, the speakers and listeners switch roles. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>10 minutes [whole class] Main task</th>
<th>Role play</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1) After practicing each pair chooses 1 of the above situations and performs role play in front of the class. As mentioned before, the speaker must include greeting, asking favor and appropriate language in the task.</td>
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<td>2) The teacher writes notes about the presentation. The audience is requested to listen to the role play as there would be quiz afterwards.</td>
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<td>3) There are 12 students, which means 6 pairs. Each pair has to finish the task within 30 seconds.</td>
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<tr>
<th>20 minutes [whole class] Post task 1</th>
<th>“Who am I” quiz</th>
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<td></td>
<td>The teacher reads excerpts from the role play in front of the class and the Ss are supposed to guess who was the speaker.</td>
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Appendix B

Materials

Handout A

Asking a favor

Request

1. Could you please take me to the doctor?
2. Could you please lend me a hand?
3. Could you help me?
4. Could you give me a ride to school?

Formal

5. Would you cook dinner tonight?
6. Would you come tomorrow?

Permission

7. May I leave home early tomorrow?
8. May I use your telephone?

Responding to favor requests

- Sure
- No problem.
- Happy to help you.
- My pleasure.
- Glad to help out.

Sample dialogue:

A. Would you mind giving me a hand?
B. I'd be happy to.
Giving excuses

- *Sorry, but I'm unable to ~*
- *Unfortunately, I have to ~*
- *I can't, I have a ~*

Sample dialogue:

A. *Could I ask you to help me with my homework?*

B. *I'm sorry, I can’t.*

A. *Why not?*

B. *I have to go to work early tomorrow morning.*
Appendix C

Materials

Handout B

Example 1 (Accepting a favor)

P: Hi A. I've got a favor to ask.
A: Yeah.
P: Would you cook dinner for me tonight?
A: Sure, but why?
P: I'm really tired today.
A: Ok, what would you like to eat?
P: Could you make pasta?
A: Sure. It’s easy to make. What type of sauce do you prefer?
P: Four cheese sauce!
A: Done.
P: Thanks a lot.
A: No problem.

Example 2 (Giving excuses)

E: Hello, Mr. B. Could I ask you a favor?
B: Sure.
E: Would you drop me off at school tomorrow morning?
B: Oh, that’s a little difficult.
E: But I have a big test tomorrow.
B: I’m sorry. I am leaving for London tomorrow morning.
E: Oh! Okay. Have a safe trip.
B: Thank you. See you soon, bye!
Appendix D

Materials

Handout C

**Asking favors:**

1. Lend you $50 for the weekend.
2. Help you with your homework.
3. Assist you with some paperwork such as filling out college application form.
4. Give you a ride to school.

**Notes:**

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