

Implementing Task-Based Language Teaching in Korean Classrooms

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Module 1 Assessment Task

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Do you think that Task-Based Language Teaching if adopted in your own teaching context would result in more students being able to communicate effectively in English? Why (not)? What would be the advantages and/or problems of implementing a task-based approach in this context?

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1 INTRODUCTION

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been a recent expansion of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and has become a popular method of how to teach second language communicative acquisition. There have been many debates on whether or not TBLT improves students' communicative efficiency, several theories on how it should be taught, as well as mixed views of the method's characteristics. In this paper, the aim is to summarize the views that best depict TBLT, analyze these opinions to draw on experiences in order to discuss the viability of using TBLT in Korean teaching contexts, what the problems and advantages would be if implemented, and whether or not it would result in Korean students being more effective communicators.

1.1 THEORIES

As stated before, there are many contradicting theories on TBLT. However, in this paper, TBLT will be classified as a teaching method to prepare students to communicate using the target language while involved in authentic scenarios. It seems that the overall goal of TBLT is for students to be able to communicate outside of the classroom realistically and naturally using the target language in specific situations.

The characteristic features that best define TBLT are similar to those of Skehan's which include firstly, that the type of language that is being learnt will involve 'real world' situations (1996:38), which will prepare students to communicate in circumstances

beyond the classroom. Secondly, that this method is learner-centered, which promotes minimal teacher input during the task to allow students the freedom to use the target language, in addition to language already learnt. Thirdly, tasks are based on meaning (1996:38) rather than form and language to encourage students to speak naturally with their peers. Lastly, throughout the task, students are working towards a distinct outcome to signify successful completion of the task (1996:38).

1.2 CULTURAL CONCERNS

While TBLT is viewed as improving learners' communicative competence, it may still be considered an ineffective way to successfully teach second language communication around the world. This appears to be because TBLT is a western method with western ways of teaching and learning in mind, which might not be transferable from culture to culture. Ellis (2003, cited in Carless, 2007:597) demonstrates that, "...task-based approaches are of Anglo-American origin and that this may bring them into conflict with cultural contexts outside the western world."

1.3 GOAL OF TBLT

This paper will thus take the position that the goal of TBLT is to provide students with opportunities and language to be able to communicate more effectively in everyday life. Seedhouse points out that, "Tasks appear to be particularly good at training learners to use the L2 for practical purposes, and we can assume that this will prepare them well for accomplishing some tasks in the world outside the classroom" (Seedhouse, 1999:155).

With TBLT the students will be completing specific tasks involving ‘real world’ situations that can prepare natural communication outside of the classroom.

2 CHARACTERISTICS

The following section is a description of the characteristics that exemplify TBLT.

2.1 ‘REAL-WORLD’ LANGUAGE

Completing tasks that focus on everyday language gives learners occasions where realistic language can be practiced and eventually used outside of the classroom. Jeon and Hahn believe that for Asian students it is difficult to sufficiently practice the target language outside the classroom, thus making TBLT an important method of teaching that provides students with authentic chances to use the target language in the classroom (2006:124). This does not necessarily mean that students will have to recreated authentic dialogues but that the task is within a real scenario, which in turn would provide realistic language to be spoken.

These tasks could provide learners, who do not have opportunities to practice the target language beyond the classroom, a chance to communicate in a realistic setting. This also gives the students, who do have opportunities to speak in the target language a chance to practice the language before they use it in a real situation outside of the classroom.

2.2 LEARNER-CENTERED

One of the unique characteristics of TBLT is that it highlights student-focused tasks as a method to gain communicative competence. “As a rule, the teacher withdraws after

allocating tasks to the learners, to allow them to manage the interaction themselves” (Seedhouse, 1999:150). Once the task begins, the teacher leaves it up to the students on how and what language they use to complete the task. Therefore, the role of the teacher is to be an observer in order to give students opportunities to naturally use the language throughout the task.

Thus, putting students into ‘real world’ situations without teacher input seems to encourage learners to use the target language and language that they have already been taught in order to complete the task. This could give students just the opportunity they need to produce and practice the language that they have learnt into a natural context. J. Willis (1996, cited in Swan, 2005:390) suggests that,

Tasks remove the teacher domination, and learners get chances to open and close conversations, to interact naturally, to interrupt and challenge, to ask people to do things and to check that they have been done.

This would provide a comfortable and natural environment for students to be able to practice the target language with each other.

However, Willis (1996, cited in Swan 2005:390) continues by arguing that,

...if students do not already know the linguistic convention for opening and closing conversations, interrupting and challenging, etc, how are they supposed to learn them without input from the ‘dominating’ teacher?

This could be problematic if students were unable to learn valuable linguistic communicative interaction skills and strategies without the input that is needed.

Swan's concern of the teacher's position is that once engaged in the task the teacher becomes the director of the task rather than an imperative input of new language (2005:391). Thus, causing a lack of new vocabulary or sentence structure being taught, this may result in no new language being spoken or learnt. Swan furthers his concerns by saying, "The naturalistic communication-driven pedagogy characteristic of TBI has serious limitations, especially as regards the systematic teaching of new linguistic material" (Swan, 2005:397). In short, without the teacher's role as a provider, it would seem that there might not be any vital new language being taught and therefore learnt.

2.3 FOCUS ON MEANING

Another element of TBLT is the focus on meaning during the task. In fact, according to Acar, "The most important characteristic of a task is its communicative purpose in which the focus is on meaning rather than form" (2006). Swan references (Prabu (1987), Nunan (1989), J. Willis (1996), Skehan (1998), and R. Ellis (2003), cited in 2005:377) by stating that, "...instructed language learning should primarily involve 'natural' or 'naturalistic' language use, based on activities concerned with meaning rather than language." It appears that with merely concentrating on meaning, students are provided with opportunities to use the language that they have been taught in a natural environment, having their only concern being to complete the task with the language that they already know. "...language learning is a developmental process promoting communication and social interaction rather than a product acquired by practicing language items, and that learners learn the target language more effectively when they are naturally exposed to meaningful task-based activities" (Jeon and Hahn, 2006:125).

Some benefits to this may be that students might have to take the language that they have already learnt to complete a communicative task with their peers. This would provide learners with opportunities to retrieve language from memory that might never be used again. Students can communicate with each other without any interruptions, which may improve fluency and natural speaking. Once students have a proficient grasp of English grammar and vocabulary, open communication would be beneficial in order to activate the language already known.

A potential problem is that students might use the most minimal language in order to complete the task. Seedhouse suggests that students often lower their language ability in order to complete the task and goes as far as saying that the language that they speak is similar to a pidgin (1999:153-154). Consequently, students would tend to lose focus on the language that they were using and concentrate on the meaning they were trying to convey to complete the task. Also, if students do not have the skills to communicate or complete the task in the target language, this could diminish future inspiration to continue studying languages for these students.

The last stage of TBLT is said to concentrate on the form of language used in the task. Being at the end of the task, teachers can show students the mistakes that they might have made and the correct language they could have used. However, once the teacher becomes involved again, the classroom turns into a controlled environment, which takes

away from the natural language being spoken and therefore diminishes the ‘real-world’ nature of the experience for the students.

2.4 COMPLETION OF TASK

There must be a finish line in order for the students to know when they have successfully completed the task. This provides a reason to do the task and encourages motivation from students.

On the other hand, seeing that there is a finish line could contribute to students rushing through tasks not necessarily using the target language to accomplish the task. Seedhouse describes learners as if they “... appear to be so concentrated on completing the task that linguistic forms are treated as a vehicle of minor importance” (1999:154). This suggests that the completion of the task has more importance for learners than the actual language being spoken. Additionally, Seedhouse states that, “...the pedagogical and interactional focus is on the accomplishment of the task rather than on the language used” (1999:150). This could add to learners’ use of inaccurate language, minimal language, and/or pidgin language as long as there is successful completion of the task. This might be how one acquires their first language, but for students who do not have opportunities to use the target language everyday creating bad habits and using minimal language could inhibit communicative development.

3 ENGLISH IN KOREA

3.1 DEVELOPING ENGLISH COMMUNICATION

In the last 10 years, the South Korean government has made English a top priority in the school systems. This is due to the fact that the government wants to have an important position in the world's political and economical view. (Li, 1998:681). There is an understanding that without English, Korea cannot gain or maintain this status. Recently, "...the focus of language teaching has been placed on changing the classroom practice from the traditional passive lecture to more active group learning that learners can be more easily expose to target language use" (Jeon and Hahn, 2006:138). The government wants Koreans to be able to communicate in English, therefore has put a high precedence on introducing CLT and TBLT into the curriculum.

3.2 MY TEACHING CONTEXT

The teaching environment that I am currently engaged in is located on a small island off of Korea's south coast. I am teaching public elementary and middle school students. My classes consist of between 25 – 30 students who I see once or twice a week for 40 – 45 minutes each lesson. There is a noticeably wide range of English speaking skills throughout the classes. I teach in a small rural community, where although undoubtedly many young people will move away to attend University and experience city life, there is still a strong association with more vocational rural occupations, which have little need for English skills.

As a whole, my students are passive learners who are accustomed to listening to lectures and are shy to speak up in class or actively participate in discussions or activities. Li supports this observation well by saying that by the time Korean students reach middle school, "...they have become accustomed to the traditional teacher structure, in which they sit motionless, take notes while the teacher lectures, and speak only when they are spoken to" (1998:691). This article was published 10 years ago, but I believe to a certain extent Li's views still accurately portray how Korean students are involved in the school system today. Seeing as though this is the context under which this paper is written, some arguments later in this paper may not prove over generalizable.

4 PROBLEMS IMPLEMENTING TBL

Overall, I would suggest that applying TBLT in Korea would not necessarily help Korean students become more efficient communicators. A number of concerns will be considered and addressed below.

4.1 WESTERN METHOD

While the potential advantages of TBLT in terms of improving one's communicative competence are real, the inherent problem with introducing TBLT to Korean students is that this is a Western method of teaching languages. Korean learners who come from a Confusion culture and whose strategies of learning and studying are different from Western cultures might have difficulty accepting this type of method. "Students rely on the teacher to give them information directly, making it very difficult to get the students to participate or be motivated in class activities" (Li, 1998:691). Learning languages

must have different approaches than other subjects. Koreans may study in ways good for maths but not language, while westerners may study in ways good for languages but not for maths. This is one example of how TBLT goals and characteristics can be affected considering the fact that there are extreme differences in learning methods between cultures.

Carless sympathizes with Asian cultures by saying that, “There is a need for more critical scrutiny of the suitability of task-based approaches for schooling, particularly in Confucian-heritage culture context where task-based teaching may prove to be in conflict with traditional educational norms” (Carless, 2007:596). While TBLT seems to be a successful way to teach communicative competence in the Western world, it might not be as effective in Korean school systems because of the cultural differences.

TBLT focuses on improving students’ communicative competence, which includes practicing speaking in the target language during class. However, Kim (2004) points out that because Koreans are from a Confucian culture, students have been brought up to refrain from ‘showing off,’ therefore making Korean learners more tentative to speak aloud, not only fearing that they will make a mistake but also what others from their culture will think of them. If students are hesitant of making a mistake or concerned with what peers will think, there will not be any new language being learnt or communication being spoken between students. This defeats the whole purpose of TBL. Hu (2002, cited in Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005:101) has found similar negative results in China and has stated that CLT has failed due to clash in the culture of learning.

4.2 EXAM-BASED SOCIETY

Although TBLT is based on creating better communication skills, there are still some major concerns with this method, especially from Korean educators and parents who believe that TBLT is not the most effective method of teaching their students and children. Korea is a test-based society, which means that an important foundation of their success in life and future is the results of their examinations, not necessarily how well they can communicate in the target language. This forces teachers to concentrate on what is going to be on the exams rather than executing methods that would initiate better communicative competence.

There is difficulty for Koreans to accept this type of teaching because some believe that, “CLT and TBLT do not prepare students sufficiently well for the more traditional, form-oriented examinations which will determine their educational future” (Littlewood, 2007:245). It seems that Koreans are worried that introducing TBLT in the classroom could take time away from grammar, reading, and writing lessons, which are large sections on their examinations which could result in lower test scores and therefore lessen one’s chance of getting into a prominent University.

This is also seen in China, where there is a similar history of Confusion culture. Teachers and students associate language learning with a strict grammatical syllabus and believe that teachers should have complete control of the classrooms. Teachers could be classified as lazy or useless if this way of teaching is not practiced (Dogancay-Aktuna, 2005:101). Having such a dependency on the outcome of tests could inhibit teachers

from introducing TBL in their classroom and the teachers who do apply it are viewed as unqualified which could eventually put their jobs in jeopardy.

4.2.1 PARENTS VS. GOVERNMENT

Teachers and the schools are pressured from parents who want a more exam-based syllabus compared to the government, who is advocating a communicative class structure. Shim & Baik (2004, cited in Littlewood, 2007:245) indicate that teachers are caught in a catch – 22 situation. Although the government expects communicative language to be taught in the schools, the parents however, request a more exam-based syllabus. It could be because, English tests in Korea are such an important part of one's future, from what University one attends, to one's future employer, that implementing TBL could be considered detrimental to potential success.

4.3 KOREAN ENGLISH TEACHERS

Another problem is the fact that there is a gap between what the government expects and what is actually taking place at schools or in classrooms. Clearly, the government wants a more communicative approach to teaching, however, the English educators in Korea are not effectively implementing TBL in their classrooms due to uncertainty of the method and lack of speaking abilities. This might be a contribution to why students are not accustomed or accepting of the method.

After interviewing 111 Korean middle and high school teachers, Jeon and Hahn concluded that the three main reasons why teachers avoid TBLT in the classroom are a.)

the teacher has very little knowledge of task-based instruction. b.) the teacher possesses limited target language proficiency. c.) the teacher has difficulty in assessing learner's task-based performance. (2006:135).

In addition to these set backs, it is possible that Korean teachers are not accustomed to this type of teaching method, which causes them to be apprehensive to introduce it in their classroom. Li found similar results in the study of 18 South Korean teachers who were all confident in their grammar, reading, and writing skills but, “they all reported that their abilities in English speaking and listening were not adequate to conduct the communicative classes necessarily involved in CLT” (1998:686).

If the Korean English teachers are not comfortable and confident with introducing TBL in their classroom, there is less of a chance that students can be motivated to use this method. Jeon and Hahn believe that, “For learners not trained in task-based learning, one of the reasons they avoid participating in task-based activities may be related to a lack of confidence in performing tasks” (2006:137). If the small opportunities that Korean students have to practice the target language are avoided, learners will have a difficult time improving communicative competence. However, if Korean teachers were to become more educated and confident with the methods of TBLT, teachers might feel more inclined to implement it in the classroom. If this were to take place, students might develop more confidence and comfortability with this method as well as speaking English in the classroom. However, speaking English in the classroom does not mean that it will continue after the bell rings

Another problem is the lack of English being spoken outside of the classroom. Kim points out that Koreans do not speak English to each other outside of class and furthermore, Korean English teachers do not speak to their students in English while in a non-academic setting (2004). If TBLT were to be implemented, there is little chance that these students would use the target language outside of the classroom. Having at the most 90 minutes with students each week, there is not enough time in class to become more effective communicators. Students need to practice the target language outside of the classroom in order to improve communication skills, and if Korean English teachers are disinclined to speak to their students in English, it reinforces the image of English as something confined to the classroom and devoid of real world significance.

4.4 USE OF THE MOTHER TONGUE (MT)

Korean learners are not familiar with being in an environment concentrated on learner-centered tasks. For students, particularly beginners who do not have enough vocabulary or knowledge of the English language, it would be very difficult and frustrating to complete a task given without teacher input. This might cause the excessive use of the mother tongue (MT) in order to complete the task, which means minimal communication in the target language. Especially with beginning learners, if there is no new language being taught, then these students have no other choice but to use their MT during the task (Carless, 2004:642). In a study of a South Korean elementary school class, Lee points out that in order to complete communicative situations, there is a huge reliance upon speaking in the MT, which hinders learners' communication opportunities to further their speaking and listening skills (2005, cited in Littlewood, 2007:244). The use of the MT

eliminates the purpose of the tasks, which is to provide opportunities for students to speak naturally in the target language and hinders the further advancement of communicative competence for the learners.

In addition to having such a minimal vocabulary and knowledge of the target language, but also not having the teacher input of new language, young students have a difficulty time developing proper speaking skills. It is extremely important and necessary for young learners to acquire good language learning skills and speaking habits at that age. Even though, once completed students are required to report their findings of the task in English, this does not replace the amount of MT used throughout the task and the English that could have been spoken during this time.

Interviewing teachers in Hong Kong, Carless and Gorden (1997, cited in Carless, 2004:642) reported that, “The teachers identified pupils’ use of Cantonese as the most prominent difficulty that occurred during tasks because this practice conflicted with the teachers’ espoused goal of learners using English.” While the MT could be used to explain directions in further detail or for translation when the MT is a distraction and becomes spoken more than the target language, then there is a problem.

4.5 RANGE OF ENGLISH SKILLS

Another issue for young learners is the range of English abilities. While working in groups, the more advanced students could complete the tasks without much or any input from the weaker students. Without this participation in the task the weaker students

would fall even further behind in their communicative competence. If working alone, the more advance students would finish their tasks first. Carless demonstrates that when the more advanced students complete the task quickly, there is a chance that these students will become 'off-task' (2002:391). In other words, because the students have finished the task, they will grow to be bored and will eventually begin to raise their noise level. This type of distraction can take away from the rest of the classes' concentration and can be disturbing for those who are attempting to complete the task.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed positive and negative aspects of certain characteristics TBL represents, the different views and opinions that TBL has attracted, and the problems if introduced into Korean classrooms. I strongly believe that TBL has its valuable points and is a new, exciting, and interactive method to improve communicative competence. However, despite the Korean government's determination to implement a more communicative approach to teaching in public school classrooms across Korea, the strongly Confusion culture of Korea with its teacher-centered, passive educational traditions is in many ways apposed to the leaner-centered ideals of TBL. The successful introduction of TBL would require more than just a change in government policy; it will require a distinctly different mindset on the part of Korean educators in order to revise the method to coincide with Korean standards of education.

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