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DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I declare:

- a) that this submission is my own work;
- b) that this is written in my own words; and
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**Module 1: Language Teaching Methodology; Classroom Research & Research Methods
(17326)**

LT/13/11

...although PPP lessons are often supplemented with skills lessons, most students taught mainly through conventional approaches such as PPP leave school unable to communicate effectively in English (Stern, 1983). This situation has prompted many ELT professionals to take note of... second language acquisition (SLA) studies... and turn towards holistic approaches where meaning is central and where opportunities for language use abound. Task based learning is one such approach...(Willis, 2005: 4–5)¹

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 your own teaching situation?

4050 words

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1. Introduction

The introduction of new approaches and models in second language teaching can be difficult. Teachers as well as students often feel comfortable with traditional methods, even if those methods provide them with minimal output and English ability. Critical functions of language, such as communication are often neglected. One such traditional method, still common throughout the world, and especially East Asia, is the presentation-practice-production (PPP) model which has become increasingly rejected by scholars (e.g. Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996). This common belief among SL researchers has led to the rise of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). “Task-based learning is an attempt to address one of the dilemmas of language teaching how, on the one hand, to confront the need to engage naturalistic leaning processes, while, on the other, to allow the pedagogic process to be managed in a systematic manner” (Skehan, 1996:58). TBLT is a teaching method that if implemented in my classroom would allow for better student communication in English. However, the application of such a process has societal and contextual barriers that must be resolved before I can pursue it in my current environment.

This paper will attempt to outline Task-Based Language Teaching and why it is superior to the outdated PPP model, while also exploring the criticisms against it. I will then introduce my current teaching context, after which I will argue that adopting a TBLT approach would result in more of my students being able to communicate more effectively in English. Finally, I will explain the advantages and/or problems with the implementation of such an approach and how it is relevant to my situation.

2. Literature review

2.1 The Failure of PPP

The concept of Task-Based Language Teaching has become increasingly popular, beginning in the 1980s (Breen, 1987; Candlin & Murphy, 1987; Nunan, 1989; Prabhu, 1987) as a rejection of the presentation-practice-production (PPP) model that had been the norm (Ellis,

2003; Long & Crookes, 1991). Although still widely used throughout the world, PPP has received widespread criticism (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996).

The inadequacies of PPP are most evident in the 'production' phase; Willis (1996) claims production "is often not achieved" (135) while learners received a poor amount of input that didn't allow for much opportunity to use the new language in any other way other than the one they were presented. Skehan (1996) reiterates this feeling, stating that students rarely leave school with any language that is usable in a real world context. This problem is noted by Long & Robinson (1998) who explain that *focusing on forms* separates linguistic forms from their meanings, inevitably leading to a disconnect between what is learned and what can be expressed.

Ellis (2003) claims students do not always learn in the same order that PPP is taught and often require a series of transitions which are absent from the PPP model. Furthermore, Skehan (1996) notes "the evidence of such an approach is unimpressive" and "the belief that a precise focus on a particular form leads to learning and automatization no longer carries much credibility in linguistics or psychology" (18).

Although discredited, "synthetic syllabuses based on structures, notions, and functions remain the norm, and variations of the present language-practise language-produce language (PPP) procedures are still fairly standard in conventional ESOL practice" (Bruton, 2002). Littlewood (2007) presents five reasons why the implementation of TBLT has met resistance in the East Asian classroom: Classroom management, avoidance of English, minimal demands on language competence, incompatibility with public assessment demands and conflict with the educational values and traditions. He states "the familiar 'PPP' sequence (presentation, practice, production) represents not only a way of 'delivering' the language specified in the syllabus but also a way of controlling the interaction of the class" (244). Classroom control is the most common reason for clinging to such an outdated approach. Another concern is that "there has been very little formal research into TBL in classrooms, where a host of different variables come into play" (Willis & Willis, 2001:176). Finally, numerous definitions of what constitutes a 'task' exist and will be explored in the following section.

2.2 Definition of Task

As its name suggests, the main concept of TBLT is the ‘task’. A task can be defined in many ways, beginning with Long’s. Put simply, a task is “a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward” (1985:89). More precisely, “a task is an activity where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome” (Willis, 1996: 53). Nunan elaborates on a tasks’ pedagogical functions, stating that it is “a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form” (2004:4).

Skehan characterizes a task as follows: meaning is primary; other learner’s meanings are not repeated; there is a connection to the real world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of outcome (1996:38). Tasks are therefore concerned with outcomes, rather than form. Ellis (2009:233) elaborates on this characterization: The students' focus should be on the meaning of the words themselves, and their practical application. There should also be a “gap” with students filling in the missing information with their own thoughts, needs, or opinions. Next, learners should be left to their own devices to achieve outcomes, through linguistic methods or otherwise. Most importantly, the students must work towards an outcome. Their main goal in this communication is to achieve a defined goal through their expressions.

More directly, Ellis also clarifies the difference between ‘task’ and ‘exercise’. “Tasks are activities that call for primarily meaning-focused language use. In contrast, exercises are activities that call for primarily form-focused language use” (Ellis, 2003:3). Now that tasks in general have been defined, let us be more specific and look at the types of tasks students will encounter and the framework for which they are implemented.

2.3 Task types and approaches to TBLT

Numerous task types and procedures for implementing TBLT are available to the SL teacher. Consistent with the definitions of ‘task’ presented in the previous section, Prabhu’s (1987)

Bangalore project was one of the first to specify three general types of tasks which can be used: Information-gap activity, which in general terms has students given information who then transfer and decode it to fit their needs. Reasoning-gap activity, which has students using their inference, deductive and practical reasoning to achieve an outcome. Opinion-gap activity, which has students applying their personal thoughts to respond to a problem task.

Prabhu's tasks are not exhaustive and they have been expanded on by others (Richards, 2001; Willis and Willis, 2007). It has been shown that Prabhu's students had better outcomes than their peers who received traditional instruction, but definitive conclusions have not been made about such a project. (Willis and Willis, 2001:175).

The design of a task-based lesson has also been presented several times (Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996) and has three common elements, seen below:

Table 1: A framework for designing task-based lessons (Ellis, 2003)

Phase	Examples of options
A. Pre-task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Framing the activity (e.g. establishing the outcome of the task) * Planning time * Doing a similar task
B. During task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Time pressure * Number of participants
C. Post-task	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Learner report * Consciousness-raising * Repeat task

The three main approaches to the implementation of TBLT are presented in the table (and analysis) below:

Table 2: A comparison of three approaches to TBLT (Ellis 2009:225)

Characteristic	Long (1985)	Skehan (1998a)	Ellis (2003)
Natural language use	Yes	Yes	Yes
Learner-centredness	Yes	Yes	Not necessarily
Focus on form	Yes – through corrective feedback	Yes – mainly through pre-task	Yes – in all phases of a TBLT lesson
Tasks	Yes – unfocused and focused	Yes – unfocused	Yes – unfocused and focused
Rejection of traditional approaches	Yes	Yes	No

The three approaches share common characteristics such as tasks being used for natural language use and a focus on form. They diverge on how this focus on form can be achieved; Long advocates corrective feedback, Skehan through pre-task planning and Ellis within the entire lesson. Ellis and Long's tasks can be either focused (requiring grammatical structure) or unfocused (all linguistic resources are available), and the use of traditional approaches is still viable in some cases (Ellis 2009:225). One of TBLT's strengths is this adaptability. As shown, no rigid outline for task-based lessons exists. The implementation of TBLT presented by scholars does share common characteristics, which gives the teacher a great deal of flexibility. However, it has provided critics with a great deal to be concerned with as well.

2.4 Criticisms of Task-Based Language Teaching

Although TBLT is largely viewed positively, it is not without its faults and criticisms. Littlewood (2007:247) notes his issues implementing a task-based syllabus because of the hazy definition of a task. Swan (2005) has criticized TBLT for its justification of the “‘rehearsal rationale’ (Nunan 1991:282) -the view (common to all ‘communicative’ approaches) that language learning activities should directly reflect what learners ‘potentially or actually need to do with the target language’”(377). He feels this rationale does not provide learners with real language use since students do not express themselves while 'rehearsing' in a natural way. They often recycle forms and language presented to them previously in a manner similar to the outdated techniques mentioned earlier.

He also claims the on-line hypothesis (i.e., acquisition through communication) derives its assumptions from a lack of data in the SLA classroom. Furthermore, countless individuals

have learned through ‘traditional’ methods in the past. While pointing out that learners should consciously notice linguistic features, he shows how conscious attention for intake has not been fully accepted and that such sweeping generalizations such as the one presented in the noticing hypothesis (i.e., conscious noticing produces acquisition) is dangerous since many non-native speakers have proficiencies that were not always gained through noticing. “The hypothesis frequently associated with TBI, to the effect that second-language acquisition happens exclusively as a result of ‘noticing’ during communicative activity, and is constrained by inflexible developmental sequences, are supported neither by convincing theoretical argument nor by empirical evidence, and are contradicted by common language-learning experience” (396). Swan criticizes the teachability hypothesis (i.e., acquisition occurs in predetermined stages) by pointing out that students often notice difficulties prior to them needing to learn them. He once again cites a lack of evidence to support this hypothesis. This complaint is the most common dismissal of TBLT because many of its presumptions may not be based on facts and haven’t sufficiently been proven in a scientific, demonstrable manner. Early indications showed that tasks are effective in presenting meaningful language, but needed more research. In its infancy, no TBLT approach had been evaluated thoroughly. Furthermore, it is claimed that unestablished facts and unproved hypotheses are the basis for most of TBLT rhetoric (Skehan, 1996,1998; Bruton, 2002; Sheen, 2004; Swan, 2005).

Although this criticism may seem harsh, Ellis (2009) has come to its defense. He is able to justify the range of definitions of task, claiming they are adequate in their scope. He cites a misunderstanding of the characteristics of a task and that all tasks have a purpose in natural language. He continues to state that Swan's (2005) rejection of the hypotheses has no basis. He provides evidence of research, below:

Table 3: Research supporting SLA hypotheses (Ellis 2009:239)

Hypothesis	Research
The online hypothesis	Online attention to form does result in learning (Mackey and Philp 1998; Mackey 1999).
The noticing hypothesis	Learners do pay attention to linguistic form and this can result in learning (e.g. Mackey, Gass, and McDonough 2001; Y. Sheen 2004).
The teachability hypothesis	There is a substantial body of research that shows that L2 acquisition involves both an order and sequence of acquisition (e.g. Ellis 1994; Bardovi Harlig 2000) and that this cannot be easily altered through instruction (e.g. Ellis 1989).

Furthermore, he gives details of a successful TBLT course in Thailand by McDonough and Chaikitmongkol (2007). He notes that the success could be due to the tasks being tailored to student proficiency, trial and error, teachers understanding the definition of task, students and teachers both being aware of the rationale for task performance and, ideally, teachers having some input into the development of materials.

While the arguments against TBLT have some merit, task-based teaching has been shown to have considerable advantages. Why then does it still meet resistance? “Clearly, no matter how convincing a case can be made for TBLT on psycholinguistic grounds, social and cultural factors may make it difficult (perhaps impossible) to implement in some contexts. There is no easy resolution to this dilemma.” (Ellis 2009:243). This is especially true in the current author's context; in the next section I will explore whether TBLT would result in more students being able 'to communicate more effectively in English' and what advantages and/or problems I am likely to encounter in its implementation.

3.0 Task-Based Language Teaching in context

In the next section, I will introduce my current teaching context. I will then explore the advantages and disadvantages of TBLT within that context, and if it would result in more effective communication from my students.

3.1 The East Asian classroom

The east Asian EFL market is a huge, wide ranging phenomenon. It is seen as a status symbol, a means to success and a necessary subject for most students (Park & Abelman, 2004). “Educators and governments in East Asia are intensively addressing the need to increase the number of people in their population who can communicate effectively in English” (Littlewood, 2007:243). Korea specifically is considered an 'exam culture', and I will elaborate on my context and how this culture affects the implementation TBLT into my classroom.

3.2 My teaching context

My current school is located in an upper-middle class suburb of Seoul, South Korea. It is an after-school academy. The school's focus is to improve students' English speaking, writing, grammar, vocabulary and overall proficiency. However, as with most academies, one of its main goals is to prepare students for their rigorous middle and high school examinations. These exams include their mid-terms, finals, and ultimately their exhaustive university entrance tests.

My students have a wide variety of English ability, age, backgrounds, motivations and communicative competence. Students range from 10 to 19 years old, with the majority of

them being late elementary or middle school aged. Classes are 40 minutes long, twice (occasionally once) a week. On average, class size is 5-7 students, but it can be anywhere from 1:1 to as many as 15. Prospective students take an entrance examination which places them in classes with learners of similar ability and age. The school does have a minimum standard of acceptance, and students with little to no English ability would not be considered. Therefore, every student at my school has a basic understanding of English and is able to express themselves in some way. More specifically, the majority of my classes are the highest level elementary or middle school. Most of these students have good listening skills, an excellent vocabulary and grasp of grammar, but are often lacking in the ability to communicate effectively through writing or speaking.

The reasons for this lack of communication are numerous. The vast majority of the students have studied English for years with outdated methods such as grammar-translation and PP P. The Korean education system is not concerned with communication, rather, students are focused on exam preparation rather than individual subjects. In their listening, writing, and grammar classes, they cram non-contextual vocabulary words weekly, listen to lectures often without a frame of reference and generally memorize grammatical forms and functions.

Writing is hardly ever a creative function, it is a means to regurgitate often irrelevant information in a prescribed form. In my speaking classes, they do have the chance to interact naturally with a native speaker without a strict focus on form like their other subjects, but due to the curriculum and time constraints, I have been just as guilty as my peers in using PPP and other traditional methods.

Genuine interaction with an English speaker happens rarely, if ever. Speaking class is often the only chance students get to orally express themselves in English. This is one reason for a lack of motivation from my students to learn English. The majority of them find it boring and

only study it because their society, schools and parents force them to. Combine these sentiments with their adolescent age and it is often a struggle to keep the students engaged, much less introduce unfamiliar ideas such as TBLT.

3.3 Student competence

As shown in the literature review, TBLT has proven very flexible to teacher and student needs. Given the right circumstances, it gives students the opportunity to communicate effectively in English using a genuine approach applicable to real world scenarios. To analyze how effective TBLT would be in my classrooms, I must first examine my students' communicative competence using the example given by Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrell (1995:7) Following their model, I am able to make some general statements of my students. First, their grammatical competence (i.e., rules, vocabulary, spelling) is quite high. This can be attributed to the use of rote memorization, PPP and exam focused studying, where grammar and form are stressed above all else. However, this grammatical competence is far from perfect. As an example, they usually do not use definite and indefinite articles. Their sociolinguistic competence (i.e., use of situationally correct words) is average. Students often use the wrong words (which translated into Korean would be appropriate) to express an idea. Also, they are often overly considerate or unintentionally impolite. Their discourse competence (i.e., creative writing, speeches, debate) is quite low. Again, reading, writing and speaking are all focused on following a pattern which they will be later tested on. The concept of creative writing, for example, is often seen as unnecessary. As for strategic competence (i.e., expressing themselves even through a breakdown in communication), my students do quite well. They have the ability to express themselves without the correct

grammatical forms or vocabulary. L1 use and non-verbal cues are used most often when a communication breakdown occurs.

As shown, my students have much need for improvement for which their current situation does not provide. Now that I have examined their competence, I am confident that the use of TBLT would be effective in helping with these deficiencies. The implementation of such a technique is however still problematic.

4.0 Advantages of a TBLT approach

As I have shown previously, TBLT has numerous advantages over the status quo teaching methods that I currently must employ. Although it would be successful, I could not apply TBLT to my situation. I will explore in the next sections the advantages, disadvantages and explain why such an approach is unrealistic in my (as well as the Korean) context.

4.1 Natural communication

Task based language teaching is advantageous because it would allow my students to communicate more effectively in English. “Specifically, in an Asian EFL environment where learners are limited in their accessibility to use the target language on a daily basis, it is first of all necessary for language learners to be provided with real opportunities to be exposed to language use in the classroom” (Jong, 2006:193). This real, spontaneous opportunity to interact with a native speaker is provided within my classroom, but is often stymied by the rigid syllabus I must follow. As I stated earlier, the Korean educational system isn't concerned with communication: An excellent example of this is how a “high level” student is able to recite from a script perfectly, read and write an answer to a form question or repeat facts learned in a PPP lesson, but is unable to properly ask to use the bathroom or drink water

during class. Assuming my students have studied English for years to reach their perceived proficiency (i.e. they do well on their exams), it's obvious that their ability to communicate naturally is lacking. A task-based approach would help them improve greatly in this area because it would shift the focus from memorization and dependency on the textbook, and allow them to communicate their wants and needs (e.g. using the bathroom or drinking water).

4.2 Motivation

Another advantage to TBLT in my classrooms would be its affect on student motivations. As I mentioned earlier, most of my students study English because it is a school subject for which they are tested. The English language is a means to an end; students understand that they are studying it to enter a good high school, university and ultimately land a good job. Academies such as my own still focus on the PPP model and other outdated techniques. These methods are employed because the students are not tested on their communicative abilities and improving it could therefore be seen as a waste of time. Furthermore, the academy system burdens students with more homework and stress.

This is hardly a recipe for a student to be motivated to communicate in English. I feel that a task-based approach would help improve this. TBLT lessons would allow students to see applications to the forms, structure and grammar they are learning. Communicating successfully via a task-based lesson and speaking to a native speaker like myself naturally would increase their confidence and acknowledge that their years of hard work would allow them to succeed in any given real world situation.

5.0 Problems with the implementation of TBLT

A task-based approach has significant advantages in my current context, but its implementation has significant problems that must be addressed. In this section I will explore them and how they affect my situation.

5.1 Views of Task-Based Learning in Asia

The problems with implementing a TBLT method are not exclusive to my classroom. While TBLT may provide learners with better outcomes in terms of communication, “there is recurrent concern that CLT and TBLT do not prepare students sufficiently well for more traditional, form-oriented examinations which will determine their educational future.” (Littlewood 2007:245). Shim & Baik elaborate: “teachers are left with no other choice than to write up reports that comply with government recommendations while continuing to practice examination-oriented classroom instruction” (2004:246). The need for change has been addressed, but unfortunately, “in order to implement tasks and task-based assessments, not only are changes in the exam system required, but also drastic conceptual changes toward learning and assessment in general in society are necessary. This is unlikely to happen easily because the exam culture is so deeply rooted in sociocultural history in Asia” (Butler, 2011:46).

5.2 Classroom management and L1

Other concerns I have with using TBLT in my classes is maintaining control and the use of L1. “In a teaching context where students share the same L1, an excessive use of L1 is a frequently articulated concern among teachers. The excessive use of L1 also often relates to teachers' concerns with classroom management” (Butler, 2011:48). Students, especially

paired or in groups, often revert to L1 as a means of easily completing a task or activity. My feelings are supported by Littlewood: “In an observational class study in South Korean primary school classrooms, Lee (2005:201) found that there was sometimes excessive dependence on the mother tongue to solve communication problems, which 'deprives learners of the opportunity to listen and speak in the target language'” (2007:244). In addition, Jong found in his study that “many Korean EFL teachers retain some fear of adopting TBLT as an instructional method because of perceived disciplinary problems related to classroom practice” (2006:203).

5.3 Practicality

My final concern is that a task-based approach is impractical. My school has a rigid syllabus that prevents much deviation from the standard textbooks. It focuses on exams too heavily to be concerned with communicating more effectively. While TBLT could be integrated in some way over time, TBLT as currently defined would be impossible in my current context. Simply put, each semester students must finish a certain number of chapters in their textbook, a novel, weekly book review tests, speeches, media classes, and computer based learning. With the occasional games and absences, the reality is that I see my students twice (sometimes once) a week and have no time to implement such an approach, no matter how effective it would be.

6.0 Conclusion

This paper has explored the advantages and concerns associated with the implementation of TBLT within my context. I have explained how TBLT, if implemented in my setting would be

advantageous for learners. It would allow students to communicate naturally and increase their extrinsic motivation. It provides learners with the ability to express themselves in a realistic way, while still remaining true to form. On paper, TBLT is a technique I could use to provide my students a way to communicate more effectively. In practice, the adoption of TBLT is not in a possibility at this time. The current school, society and culture I teach within, while slowly seeming to embrace a more task-based approach, present too many conceptual and practical concerns that cannot be ignored. Regardless, I still feel that in the future a task-based approach should be adopted in my situation, and Asia in general. It has been shown to provide learners with a greater ability to communicate more effectively and within my context would be an excellent benefit to students.

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