

Designing and Implementing a Task-Based Syllabus for a Business EFL Class

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Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the current state and issues surrounding the topic of EFL syllabus design in Japan. At present, there is a great deal of research advocating a task-based approach (TBA) over other approaches. This paper describes and analyzes the design, implementation, and effects of a task-based syllabus (TBS) on an adult EFL business class in Japan. The results seem to confirm that task-based syllabi hold great promise in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly relating to learners who require English for specific purposes (ESP).

この論文の目的は、日本におけるEFL用シラバスデザインの実情を述べ、その問題点を論じることである。現在のところ、多くの研究者によりタスクベースドアプローチ(TBA)の有効性が確かめられているが、本論文では、日本人英語学習者を対象としたEFLビジネスクラスで用いられているタスクベースドシラバス(TBS)を概観し、その有効性をさまざまな視点から検証する。その結果、英語教育(ELT)の分野、とりわけ、目的に特化した英語(ESP)を学ぶ場合、タスクベースドシラバスは非常に有効であること等が明らかになった。

Introduction

In this paper, I describe how I designed and implemented an EFL *task-based syllabus* (TBS) to employees of an import/export company in Japan. This paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, I define what is meant by a *task-based approach* (TBA) and provide a rationale for *task-based language teaching* (TBLT). Some of the reasons I outline include the shortcomings of other more traditional approaches, the large body of empirical evidence supporting a TBA, and the fact that TBAs may accentuate motivation within learners.

In the second part of this paper, I describe how I designed my syllabus. This process began with a *needs analysis* I conducted on my learners. The information revealed by the needs analysis was integral in helping me to choose materials and design tasks, as well as to specify and grade the lessons in my syllabus to fit the specific needs of my students.

In the third part of this paper, I outline and explain how I implemented each lesson. This consists of six progressive stages of the lesson: a pre-task; the main task; planning for the report to be given in the next stage; reporting the outcome of the task; listening to the same or a similar task being done by native speakers of English, and language analysis exercises. Lastly, I share some of the observations from my experience and offer some suggestions, which may help EFL teachers taking on similar projects.

Part 1: Task-based Language Teaching

1.1. What is a Task-Based Approach?

A TBA is one in which the *task* is the focal point of each lesson, the lessons are specified and graded in terms of these tasks, and communication is seen as a *process* (means driven) focusing on *how* something is learned rather than a set of *products* (ends driven) focusing on *what* is to be learned (Nunan 1988, 11). Although several definitions of *task* exist (see e.g. Breen 1987, 161; Prabhu 1987, 24; Skehan 1996, 38), for present purposes I will identify four criteria commonly associated with *tasks*: a task involves some negotiation of meaning; task completion has some priority; the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome; and there is some sort of relationship to the real world.

1.2. Rationale for a Task-Based Approach

A. Research Support

One of the rationales for a TBA is that there exists a large body of empirical evidence advocating it over other approaches. Research has shown that there is little resemblance between *acquisitional* sequences and *instructional* sequences based on linguistic forms (Ellis 1989, Lightbown 1983), and learning is non-linear and cumulative (as are *analytic* approaches such as the TBA) rather than linear and additive (*synthetic* syllabuses) (Selinker and Lakshaman 1992, Kellerman 1985).

Moreover, research findings in various domains such as general education (Swaffar et al. 1982), into teachers' classroom practices (Shavelson and Stern 1981), and in second language acquisition (Long and Crookes 1993) have many EFL professionals convinced that the TBS has a richer potential for promoting successful language learning than do other syllabus types (Rooney 2000). The research to date helps teachers in several ways. It shows teachers that where one uses language is often less relevant than what one uses it for (ie, task). For instance, students learning about using business English on the telephone (setting) would need to learn how to perform tasks on the telephone such as *arranging meetings* and *taking messages*. Further, the research to date shows that being able to manipulate grammatical structures without *negotiating meaning* is of little use to EFL learners. That is, language is primarily a *meaning* system in that it develops in

response to the need to *mean* and to understand what others *mean* (Halliday 1975).

However, this is not to suggest that a focus on *form* is useless in TBLT. To the contrary, evidence has shown that a focus on *form* after meaning has been negotiated is highly beneficial to learners (Zobl 1985, Schmidt and Frota 1986, Pienemann and Johnson 1987, Eckham et al. 1988, Crookes 1989, White 1989, Schmidt 1990, Long 1991).

In other words, once learners have negotiated meaning (as they would in trying to complete a task), their awareness becomes heightened and their cognitive state is much more receptive in acquiring the *linguistic items* necessary to perform the task (comprehensible input). Against this background, several ELT professionals advocate a methodology that adopts task as the unit of analysis in an attempt to provide an integrated, internally coherent approach to six components of the teaching of a TB lesson, and one which is compatible with SLA theory (see part three).

B. Shortcomings of Other Approaches

One of the reasons I now explore the potential of a more modern *process* approach such as the TBA is that I have experienced drawbacks with traditional *product* focused syllabuses (structural and functional/notional syllabuses) I have used in the past. For instance, I have found that dialogues in textbooks using structural approaches often contain language that is contrived to model the target structure. This language tends to sound unnatural and will be of little help to learners encountering *natural* English outside the classroom. Further, functional/notional approaches seem to rely too much on memorizing set phrases for particular situations, and often do not provide a basis for learners to use previously learned language to further expand their current ability. That is, learners of functional/notional approaches may find it difficult to circumlocute when they forget which phrase to use in a particular situation.

C. Accentuating Motivation

Another rationale for the TBS is that it may accentuate learners' motivation (University of Leicester 2001, Unit F, 39; Rooney 2000). One of the features of a TBS thought to motivate learners is that learners can see the face-validity of using language and doing tasks which are similar to those they do in real life (this information is obtained in the *needs analysis*, see part 2).

Moreover, in my experience teaching EFL, learners' motivation tends to increase when they are studying language that is *natural* and *authentic*. Language that students encounter in the TBS has the advantage of mirroring the unpredictability of language learners will likely encounter outside the classroom.

Further, short-term motivation is heightened by the need to achieve the objective of each task. Other types of short-term motivations are tied into the six phases that

encompass the TBS and will be explained in greater detail in part three.

Part 2: Designing a Task-based Syllabus

2.1. Needs Analysis of my Students

The group of students I used in my pedagogical application of the TBS consisted of eight employees of an import/export company in Japan. My students requested thirteen lessons over fifteen weeks. Each lesson was an hour long, and occurred once a week with one week off after the first and seventh week.

I used the first lesson to accomplish three main goals. First, I wanted get to know my students better personally and establish a rapport with them. Second, I attempted to find out what their proficiency level was. Their proficiency levels ranged from upper beginner to mid intermediate. Third, I wanted to find out how they would need to use English in their future, as well as what type of classroom practices were likely to stimulate them.

Some of the ways I sought these goals were by asking my learners questions, observing their performance in activities, and by administering a questionnaire. I discovered that my students needed English mostly for *travel* and *business* related situations. Some of the *travel* situations mentioned included *asking for information* (such as about *directions* and *schedules*), *booking a hotel*, and about *dining in restaurants*. Some of the *business* related situations stated included *entertaining foreign clients*, *decision making and problem solving*, *talking on the telephone*, and *business letter writing*.

In addition, it transpired in my analysis of my students that all of them had studied English in the Japanese school system, and six of eight found their previous study largely impractical. The method they were all taught by was *teacher-centered* and focused on translation, grammar, and reading. My students were most concerned with improving their speaking. While most students said they did not like lecture-based lessons, paradoxically all but one said they preferred lessons to be teacher centered.

One of the methods they cited as being the most stimulating included activities that discuss things that are real (not imagined as in role plays). My learners did not state a preference in materials (texts, videos, etc) but they did make clear that exposure to *natural English* (as they would encounter outside the classroom) was essential to them.

2.2. Choosing Materials and Specifying Tasks to be used in the TBS

A. Tasks

My first step in my collection of materials to be used in my syllabus was to determine which tasks I would use. Calling on the information I obtained in my *needs analysis*, I tried to design tasks, which would replicate actual tasks my students may

undertake when communicating in the target language. For instance, lesson eight gives learners the chance to practice *arranging a meeting*. These tasks would have to be suited to my learners' proficiency level (more on level of task difficulty in next section).

Some of the tasks I designed myself, and others I located in various course and resource books (Nova 2000, Helgesen et al. 1999, Hadley 1984, Barnard and Cady 1992). I tried to create tasks that would engage learners in *negotiating meaning* (communicative), and hence encourage learners to use language more closely resembling natural language. For the tasks to achieve this, learners have to be motivated by a need to achieve an objective. For instance, in lesson eleven, the objective for learners is to choose which of three London office spaces would be best most suitable if their trading company were to expand there.

B. Tape and Transcriptions

Once I had stockpiled several tasks, I narrowed down the tasks to the fifteen I thought would be the most useful to my students. I made a recording of native speakers of English doing each task or in some cases, parallel tasks that were more suitable to their situations. For instance, in lessons one and eight where my students discussed working in a trading company, the native speakers (EFL teachers) discussed working in an English school. I further narrowed down my tasks to the twelve I thought were most successful and then transcribed the recordings of each task (keeping the remaining three as supplementary material).

C. Language Analysis Activities

The transcriptions of the task served many functions. First, I was able to analyze the transcription of each task for *features of language*, which I could draw learners' attention to. I then arranged *language analysis activities* focusing on the features of language that I chose. Some of the activities I designed myself, and others I found in grammar and course books (Nova 2000, Swan and Walter 1997, Willis and Wright 1985, Blundell et al. 1982).

I based my choices of the features to be studied in the *language analysis* of a particular transcription on a combination of the following four criteria (no particular order):

- 1) The proficiency levels of my students: As I mentioned above, my learners' levels range from *upper-beginners* to mid-intermediate, thus I had to choose features that they could cope with.
- 2) The degree of relevancy of the feature to the task: For example, for lesson five, I chose *prepositions* and *expressions of place* as my features because they are essential in giving *directions*.

- 3) The frequency of the feature occurring in the transcription of the task. I obtained the frequency of each word in a particular transcription using concordance software (see references, Scott 1998). This software also enabled me to call up concordances of key words sorted alphabetically to the right and left, which enabled me to identify frequently occurring word combinations.
- 4) The frequency by which the feature occurs in English: I used this in lesson one. First, as I described previously, I conducted a frequency analysis of the transcription of lesson one. I found that the word "to" was the most frequently used word in the transcript. Before I designed *language analysis* exercises focusing on the word "to", I wanted to make sure that it was also a frequently occurring word in English. According to *The COBUILD Bank of English*, which contains a spoken corpus of one hundred and ninety-six million words, the word "to" was the sixth most frequently word used in the corpus (Willis 1998a, 65).

2.3. Sequencing and Grading Lessons in the TBS

My lessons were sequenced and graded according to the complexity of the task. That is, the first task was to be the easiest (easier tasks tend to focus more on fluency) and the last task was to be the most difficult (more difficult tasks tend to focus more on accuracy). The complexity of these tasks is not based on the linguistic items used in the task, but resides in aspects of the tasks themselves.

Some of the cognitive dimensions that have been suggested in the research include:

- 1) *Planning time*: Tasks which include planning time are easier than ones without planning time (Bygate 1987).
- 2) *Number of elements*: Tasks involving more elements are more difficult than tasks involving less elements (Brown et al. 1984).
- 3) *Single versus dual tasks*: For instance lesson one is easier than lesson five because it made only one demand (to sequence qualities belonging to a good worker), whereas lesson five made two demands of learners (for them to think up a route on a map and describe it at the same time) (Robinson 1998).
- 4) *Prior knowledge*: Tasks in a domain which learners have *prior knowledge* are easier than tasks in a domain in which learners have no prior knowledge of (Robinson 1998).
- 5) *Modality*: Speaking leads to more pressure than writing, and listening leads to more pressure than reading (Ellis 1987).
- 6) *Stakes*: Tasks in which it is important to do the task correctly are more difficult than tasks where there is no consequence that follow from task completion (Willis 1993).
- 7) *Control*: Tasks in which the participants have a great deal of control are easier than

tasks in which the participants have less control (Pica et al. 1993).

Part 3: Implementation and Analysis

3.1. Implementing Each Lesson

There are several factors involved in the implementation of a TB lesson, which differ from traditional views of ELT. Unlike the widespread P-P-P (*presentation - practice - production*) methodology, which is based on the belief that out of accuracy comes fluency, a TB methodology is based on the belief that out of fluency comes accuracy. Hence, my TBS will commence with activities focusing on fluency and work towards a focus on form as the lesson progresses.

Another aspect of TBLT methodology that may be distinctive is that it attempts to account for *language varieties* found in real communication. I attempted to use activities and activity types that exposed students to varying degrees of casual and *formal* language such as pair and small group work activities (casual, focusing on fluency) and writing or presentations in front of the class (formal, focusing on accuracy).

Following the recommendations made by Willis, J. (2000, 1998b), Willis, D. (1990), Skehan (1996), Crookes (1986, referred to in Long and Crookes 1992), and Long (1985), I implemented each lesson in my TBS using the following six steps:

- 1) *Introduction/pre-task*: This introduces and draws learners' attention to the lesson topic or theme (e.g. Lesson nine: *Entertaining foreign clients*) Further, it helps to prepare students for the upcoming task by providing them with *content* knowledge and giving them initial exposure to target forms within a communicative context. For instance, the task for lesson nine involves students explaining various Japanese dishes on a menu in English, hence the pre-task involves a class discussion about which foods foreigners to Japan are likely to need an explanation of.
- 2) *Task*: As I mentioned through out this paper, the *task* is the focal part of the lesson from which all other aspects derive. The *task* provides an opportunity for students to focus on and realize target meanings. As each task contains a clear objective for the students to achieve, students are likely to sacrifice accuracy for fluency at this stage.
- 3) *Planning*: In this stage, I help my students to prepare for the next stage, an oral report of what transpired in the previous step, the *task*. This step allows the student to begin focusing on accuracy and allows for help from the teacher.
- 4) *Report*: In this stage, students report to the rest of the class the results of their work during the task phase. Here, I have created a situation in which students will focus primarily on accuracy because the circumstances of the communication are public, rehearsed, and final.
- 5) *Listening*: In this stage, I play a recording of native speakers of English performing

the same (or similar) task as the one the students performed earlier. This gives students a chance to hear (or read as in lesson four) the target forms used in a context, which has become familiar to them through their own attempts to perform and report the task.

- 6) *Analysis*: This consists of language awareness exercises that give learners a chance to formulate generalizations about the language they have heard or read.

3.2. Analyzing the Results: Problems and Recommendations

Overall, my experience designing and implementing a TBS was a positive one, however I encountered a few hurdles, which may be of interest to other teachers taking on similar projects. First, I had difficulties finding resource and course books using a TBA. I had to take small parts from several different books and adapt them suit a TB methodology (Rooney 2000, Lamie 1999).

Another difficulty involved time management. For some lessons, I was not able to complete all six steps required of a TB lesson in the one-hour time span. One of the reasons for this is that some of the tasks were too long and perhaps too complex for some of my learners. In order to avoid this in the future, I intend to pilot various task types in the first lesson of a future TB course.

Furthermore, as Breen (1987, 166) suggests, I would like to allow myself to be more flexible with a future TBS. That is, if things are not progressing as planned, I need to be prepared and willing to alter my syllabus. This involves having several additional tasks and TB lessons prepared.

Lastly, I found *assessing task difficulty* and *sequencing pedagogic tasks* especially difficult. While there exists some empirical support proposing parameters of task classification and difficulty, these parameters are not concrete and finite, and thus I was largely left to my own intuition in determining the complexity of a task. In practice, some of my learners appeared to have an easier time with some of the supposedly more difficult tasks and a more difficult time with some of the supposedly easier tasks.

When I asked my learners about this, seven of eight students confirmed my assumption. When I asked them why, several students said they found *comparing* type activities (lessons 10 and 11) easy because they had prior experience with them at school. Moreover, most students said they found the tasks in lessons 1 and 2 challenging because they were uncomfortable in persuading others to agree with their opinions.

Conclusion

While I have mentioned some of the obstacles I experienced in designing and implementing my TBS, the advantages of the TBS, in my mind, far out weigh the disadvantages. The main reason I believe that TBLT holds such promise in ELT is that it truly motivates learners. Learners are motivated by the fact that the *tasks* are

communicative, the language they learn is *useful* to them, and they are exposed to *natural* language. I witnessed firsthand how learners of a TBA are able to process comprehensible input more effectively than learners using a P-P-P methodology. With the success I experienced in my TBS, it is surprising to me that this approach has not become more popular in Japan. As I have indicated above, educators may find it difficult to assess task difficulty and sequence tasks in a TBS. Research in these areas are in their infancy and more is needed if TBSs are to become more operative and thus more widespread.

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