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Collaborative Design and Implementation of a TBLT Project: Working with Graduate Students

Lee Shzh-chen Nancy

Abstract

This paper presents a project I conducted with four graduate students enrolled in an Introduction to Applied Linguistics course at the Graduate School of Humanities, Osaka University. Using *Teaching Speaking: A Holistic Approach* (Goh & Burns, 2012) as the core text, the course explored the teaching of speaking from both theoretical and practical perspectives through a task-based lens. As the final project, the graduate students collaboratively designed a speaking course for EFL undergraduate students. They discussed the learning goals and needs of Japanese undergraduate students in order to support the development of English communicative competence. Based on a needs analysis, each graduate student designed a lesson incorporating speaking-focused tasks aligned with the principles of task-based language teaching (TBLT). These lessons were implemented in the author's first-year General English classes. The graduate students assisted with task implementation and the collection of learner feedback and responses. Following implementation, they reflected on the lesson designs and analyzed learner achievement and feedback. This paper concludes with reflections on guiding graduate students through the cycle of course design, implementation, and reflection, and discusses possibilities for future collaborative student projects.

1. Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has become a prominent approach in the communicative language teaching framework since the 1980s (Ellis, 2003, 2009; Long, 2015; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). It has been widely defined and implemented (Ellis, 2003, 2018) and offers learners the opportunity to develop speaking proficiency by engaging in tasks that resemble real-life situations. TBLT represents a shift away from grammar-driven syllabi toward meaning-centered instruction (Ellis, 2003, 2018; Long, 2015). Within this approach, tasks are primary classroom activities that allow learners to draw upon their existing linguistic resources to achieve communicative goals rather than to produce predetermined grammatical forms (Skehan, 1998; Bygate, Skehan, & Swain, 2001). Language development is facilitated when learners engage in negotiation of meaning, receive feedback, and modify output in response to communication breakdowns (Long, 2015). Tasks provide opportunities for such interaction, allowing learners to notice gaps in their interlanguage. Long's earlier definition of task-based language learning suggested that learning should be meaning centered and largely incidental. However, while research has shown that learners become more fluent from completing tasks, TBLT also faces criticism. One major criticism of the earlier task-based language teaching approaches (e.g., Long, 1991) is that it overemphasized the importance of meaning and overlooked the importance of form. More recent developments in TBLT have addressed this concern by recognizing the importance of form-focused instruction (FFI) through the integration of form into meaningful tasks (Ellis, 2009; Long, 2015). Recent TBLT advocates argue that while communication is central, attention to linguistic features through mechanisms such as focus on form is also important (Long, 1991; Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001).

This paper reports on a collaborative project conducted within an Introduction to Applied Linguistics course at the Graduate School of Humanities, Osaka University. Drawing on Goh and Burns' (2012) book on teaching speaking, a TBLT project with task-based lessons was collaboratively designed by graduate students for first-year Japanese university EFL learners. These lessons were subsequently implemented in general undergraduate English classes, providing an opportunity to examine how TBLT principles can be translated into classroom practice. This paper aims to outline the design process of lessons, their alignment with TBLT principles, and to reflect on the implementation and outcomes of this project. By documenting the design and enactment of this project, the study hopes to contribute to ongoing discussions regarding the practical application of TBLT in higher education settings and to highlight the complexities involved in operationalizing task-based

principles in authentic classroom environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Communicative Language Teaching Framework*

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is a dynamic approach to teaching speaking that has changed throughout the decades (Hughes, 2011). A fundamental principle in this framework is that learners engage in communication based on their desire to communicate about meaningful topics (Bygate, 1998). Therefore, communicative language teaching advocates emphasize the importance of authentic communication as learners develop communicative competence from interacting with other individuals in communicative contexts. While CLT has become one of the most dominant approaches for speaking development, a recurring criticism is that it overemphasizes meaning at the expense of neglecting linguistic forms and syntactic accuracy (Savignon, 2005). Some CLT proponents have gone as far as to discourage direct grammar teaching because they believe that explicit knowledge cannot be transferred from teachers to students (Lochland, 2013). Some studies have found that learners who engage in communication practice achieve the same levels of grammatical accuracy as those who participate in traditional grammar-focused practice, while the communicative competence of the former group was better than the learners who had no communication practice (Savignon, 2005).

Communicative language teaching has exerted a strong influence in many countries in the EFL context. In Japan, CLT is being increasingly widely practiced in English-language classrooms especially at the higher education level (Savignon, 2005; Takanashi, 2004). However, despite the results of some controversial studies, it is a misconception that grammar is never taught in CLT classrooms (Thompson, 1996). While authentic interaction is important, communicative competence is partially based on the accurate use of grammatical forms (Canale & Swain, 1980).

2.2 *Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)*

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is one of the most widely applied approaches in the communicative language teaching framework (Ellis, 2003, 2009; Long, 2015; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). However, despite its wide application in classrooms, there are still controversies regarding how task-based language teaching should be conceptualized. Depending on how it is defined, it brings different applications and implications and thus different learning results (Ellis, 2018). Task-based learning was initially introduced to the field of language learning by Prabhu (1987), who argued that the focus of teaching needs to be placed on tasks. He argued against the preselection of linguistic forms because language acquisition is an implicit process that occurs when learners use language for communication. According to Prabhu (1987), tasks which are motivating and engaging are enough for learners' linguistic development without paying attention to specific linguistic forms. Long and Crookes (1992) also emphasized the importance of language learning through communication but unlike Prabhu, they advocated the need for learners to attend to form incidentally during interaction, particularly when communication breaks down and results in misunderstandings. Therefore, task-based language teaching is an approach to course design where learners learn by doing tasks, which are meaningful, relevant, engaging, and stimulating and which includes an incidental focus on form (Long, 1985). Long (2015) later redefined task-based language teaching as "an approach to course design, implementation, and evaluation intended to meet the communicative needs of diverse groups of learners" (p. 5). This task design involves more than selecting communicative activities; it requires careful alignment of learning goals, learner needs, sequencing, and assessment (Ellis, 2003; Long, 2015).

While the task-based language teaching approach has been diversely defined, the concept of *task* has also been diversely defined (Butler, 2011). From a language learning perspective, a task is "a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than on form" (Nunan, 1989, p. 10). Skehan (1998) defined a task as "an activity in which meaning is primary, there is some communication problem to solve, there is some relationship to real-world activities, task completion has some priority, and the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome" (p. 95). Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001) defined task as an activity which requires learners to use language with an emphasis on meaning in order to attain an objective. Ellis (2003) further defined tasks to be learner activity plans with a primary focus on meaning, real-world language usage, and cognitive processes such as selecting, classifying, ordering, reasoning, and evaluating information to

achieve clear communicative outcomes. The above definitions share the idea that task is a language usage activity with a primary focus on meaning.

2.3 *Focus on Form and Focus on Forms*

The distinction between *focus on forms* and *focus on form* is central to discussions of grammar instruction in TBLT. *Focus on forms* refers to a traditional instructional approach in which linguistic elements such as grammar rules and vocabulary are taught explicitly and sequentially, often isolated from meaningful communication (Long, 1991). In contrast, *focus on form* involves drawing learners' attention to linguistic features that arise within meaning-focused communicative activities. Long's (1991) definition of *focus on form* argues that it occurs primarily in meaning-centered discourse, through incidental, transitory, and extensive interactions (i.e., several different forms are attended to in a single lesson). In this approach, learners primarily engage in communication, but their attention is briefly directed to relevant forms as they become salient during interaction (Long, 1991; Doughty & Williams, 1998). This integration of form and meaning allows learners to notice linguistic features while maintaining the communicative orientation of the task (Ellis, 2003).

Within the focus on form framework, attention to language can occur either incidentally or through planned instructional design. *Incidental focus on form* occurs spontaneously during communicative interaction when teachers or learners address linguistic issues that emerge during meaning-focused communication (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001). In contrast, *planned focus on form* involves teachers intentionally designing tasks that are likely to elicit specific linguistic features while maintaining communicative goals (Ellis, 2001). Both incidental and planned focus on form support language development by linking attention to linguistic form with meaningful language use rather than teaching grammar in isolation (Long, 1991; Ellis, 2003).

3. Collaborative Project

3.1 *Institutional Context and Background*

The idea for this research project originated from my graduate class titled Introduction to Applied Linguistics in 2024 at the Division of Language and Culture, the Graduate School of Humanities, Osaka University. The Division of Language and Culture focuses on the study of language, communication, and culture from both theoretical and applied perspectives. In my teaching and research within the division, I usually work with graduate students on topics related to applied linguistics, looking at different aspects of language learning and teaching from both practical and theoretical perspectives. The division provides a supportive research community where students and faculty collaboratively explore how language practices shape communication, learning, and social participation in contemporary societies.

The original syllabus looked at language learning and teaching from a scientific research perspective and how research findings can be applied in language classrooms. The course was designed for graduate students interested in the mechanism of language development and who want to be future language teachers or researchers. Therefore, students were supposed to read research papers related to language proficiency development, participate in active class discussions, and to complete research paper critiques. However, I recognized a need to accommodate their academic interests and backgrounds. I invited the students to collaboratively develop a new syllabus and eventually, the course evolved from reading and understanding existing literature on applied linguistics to conducting a joint research project comparing the effects of AI and machine translation feedback on EFL writing. Students presented their research results at an international conference in Osaka and submitted a conference proceedings paper afterwards.

3.2 *Course Framework*

Based on my previous experience with course modification last year, I decided to embed a collaborative research project into my new course syllabus from the beginning. My Introduction to Applied Linguistics course in the 2025 fall semester focuses on teaching and researching speaking through a task-based lens. Using *Teaching Speaking: A Holistic Approach* (Goh & Burns, 2012) as the core text, the course introduced key dimensions of speaking pedagogy. The textbook is divided into four parts and each part consists of several chapters: 1) speaking processes and skills, 2) spoken discourse, 3) designs and approaches, and 4) classroom practices. Graduate students read one chapter of the course textbook each week prior to seminar-style discussions. In class, they shared their

understandings and reflections on the chapter. Based on what they learned from the textbook, the graduate students collaboratively designed a TBLT speaking course for their final assessment. We implemented some of the lessons and tasks in undergraduate general English classes for first-year EFL Japanese students.

Each graduate student was required to create an original lesson incorporating speaking-focused tasks that reflected principles of task-based language teaching, such as meaningful interaction, negotiated communication, and functional language use. The four graduate students enrolled in the course had diverse backgrounds, including different nationalities and experiences with language learning and language usage. None of the students had heard of the concept task-based language teaching prior to the beginning of the course.

4. Course Design

4.1 *Needs Analysis and Learning Goals of Target Learners*

It was important to identify learner needs and learning objectives before moving on to course design and lesson development. Based on our weekly discussions in the Introduction to Applied Linguistics course, it was agreed that Japanese university students have a need to develop their English communicative ability as they have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. Japanese university learners, in particular, have historically experienced grammar-focused instruction aimed at entrance examinations, sometimes resulting in limited communicative confidence despite years of formal study. Table 1 summarizes the learning needs and objectives discussed by the four graduate students prior to course design.

Table 1. Needs and Learning Objectives of Japanese EFL undergraduate students

Course aim	To develop English speaking ability so that students are able to interact and make themselves understood in different academic and everyday situations.
Student needs	1. Meaningful oral practice (students need to have structured situations where they feel comfortable and are able to have functional practice applicable in the real world) 2. Building confidence and reducing anxiety 3. Intelligibility support (help students make themselves understood) 4. Practical communication strategies (how to keep a conversation going, ask for clarification, repair misunderstandings, and explain ideas)
Learning objectives	Speaking fluency / discourse organization: Speak for a couple of minutes continuously on everyday or academic topics with basic coherence and some level of fluency Participate actively in pair or group discussions, contribute ideas and ask follow-up questions Communication strategies / interaction management: Use strategies to manage communication breakdowns (asking for clarification or paraphrasing when a certain word is unknown) Functional speaking: Give short and clear explanations about academic or personal topics Prepare and deliver 2–3-minute presentations using simple but accurate English Participate in role-play scenarios Collaboration and Interaction: Collaborate in English to complete communication tasks (problem-solving, interviews, information-gap) Show increased willingness to speak and engage in English

4.2 *Lesson Development and Task Design*

Following the agreed course aim, learner needs and learning objectives, the graduate students began the lesson development phase of the project. Each student was responsible for designing one lesson for a hypothetical speaking-focused English course for first-year undergraduate students at Osaka University. The graduate students were encouraged to align their lessons with key TBLT principles,

including focus on meaning, the use of authentic or realistic communicative situations, and opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning during interaction.

Each graduate student independently designed a set of speaking tasks to structure their lesson. Drawing on concepts introduced in the course readings, particularly Goh and Burns (2012), the students developed speaking tasks such as information-gap activities, opinion-sharing tasks, and problem-solving discussions that required learners to use English to achieve a communicative outcome. In designing their tasks, students also considered learner proficiency levels, task sequencing, anticipated learning outcomes, and possible evaluation methods. Students also paid attention to the stages of a task-based lesson, including pre-task preparation, the main communicative task, and post-task reflection, feedback or homework assignments.

The graduate students presented their draft lessons and task designs during class discussions. These presentations allowed each student to explain the rationale behind their lesson objectives, task structure, and expected learner outcomes. Peers and the instructor provided feedback on various aspects of the lesson design, including task clarity, the level of communicative demand, and the feasibility of implementation in a real classroom setting. This process created opportunities for critical discussion about task design and encouraged students to reflect on how theoretical principles could be translated into practical classroom design. Based on the feedback received, the graduate students revised and refined their lesson plans and tasks before implementation.

5. Task Implementation in Classroom

Following the lesson design stage, graduate students were offered the opportunity to implement the tasks they developed in an authentic teaching context. Specifically, they were invited to implement their tasks in my undergraduate General English classes at Osaka University. I shared my teaching schedule with the graduate students so that they could potentially choose a time slot that suits their timetable. Due to their other semester assessment deadlines, only three out of the four graduate students chose to implement the tasks they designed. Each graduate student visited a different General English class that I taught and co-taught a 90-minute lesson with me. At the beginning of the lesson, the graduate students briefly introduced themselves and the purpose of their visit to the undergraduate students. They also introduced the tasks they had designed and gave task instructions in Japanese or English depending on the complexity of the task and the anticipated needs of the learners, with the aim of ensuring that learners clearly understood the communicative goals of the activity.

The three implemented lessons featured different types of speaking tasks reflecting key principles of task-based language teaching. One graduate student implemented a debate task that required learners to debate and defend positions on a given topic. The second graduate student implemented a pair-based information negotiation task in which learners exchanged and clarified information only in English in order to complete the activity. The third graduate student introduced a role-play task that asked learners to assume specific roles and engage in a simulated communicative situation. Prior to the class sessions, each graduate student prepared instructional materials, including PowerPoint slides and handouts, to support task implementation and learner participation.

To examine the outcomes of the lessons, data on learner experiences and learning outcomes were collected after task completion. Undergraduate students completed short learner surveys reflecting on their participation and perceived learning, and they also submitted follow-up homework related to the classroom tasks. These materials provided insight into learner task achievement and learner self-evaluation. In the following graduate seminar class, graduate students collectively discussed the implementation experience, reflecting on both the practical aspects of task delivery and the learner responses. This discussion allowed the graduate students to evaluate the effectiveness of their task design and to consider possible improvements for future task-based teaching practices.

6. Project Reflection and Discussion

The collaborative project provided graduate students with an opportunity to deepen their understanding of task-based language teaching (TBLT) by connecting theoretical knowledge with practical classroom experience. As discussed in the literature review, TBLT emphasizes meaningful interaction and communicative engagement for language development (Ellis, 2003, 2018; Long, 2015). By designing and implementing speaking tasks, the graduate students were able to experience the diversely defined concept of task (Nunan, 1989; Skehan, 1998; Ellis, 2003) and create opportunities for meaningful language use and communicative outcomes. Students also needed to consider practical

aspects of task design, including task sequencing, learner proficiency levels, and learner interaction, which they would not otherwise experience through textbook study alone.

The project also prompted reflection on the role of linguistic form within meaning-focused instruction. As discussed in the literature review, communicative language teaching has sometimes been criticized for prioritizing meaning over grammatical accuracy (Savignon, 2005). However, more recent developments in TBLT emphasize the integration of attention to linguistic form within communicative interaction through focus on form (Long, 1991; Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001). During task implementation, graduate students observed that learners occasionally encountered difficulties expressing ideas or maintaining interaction. These moments sometimes prompted brief attention to linguistic forms, such as vocabulary choice or sentence structure, while communication remained the primary focus of the task. Such observations helped the graduate students understand how meaning-focused interaction and attention to form can coexist within task-based instruction.

Another important outcome of the collaborative project was the development of reflective teaching practices among the graduate students. After implementing their lessons in undergraduate classrooms, students critically examined their pedagogical decisions and evaluated learner responses through feedback and group discussion. By observing and discussing multiple task implementations, they also learned from the experiences of their peers. This reflective process allowed them to assess whether their tasks were aligned with task-based principles and whether they effectively promoted communicative goals. Through reflection, students also identified areas for improvement, such as clarifying instructions, adjusting task difficulty, and allocating more time for interaction. In particular, they observed how tasks encouraged negotiation of meaning among learners. Negotiation of meaning and communicative interaction are widely recognized as processes that facilitate language development (Long, 2015). During task implementation, learners often asked for clarification, reformulated ideas, or paraphrased expressions in order to maintain communication, demonstrating how tasks create opportunities for active language use.

Another insight emerging from the project was the discrepancy between planned lesson designs and actual classroom implementation. While the graduate students designed their tasks based on theoretical principles of TBLT, classroom implementation revealed the complexities involved in translating these principles into practice. As noted in previous discussions of communicative and task-based pedagogy (Ellis, 2003; Long, 2015), classroom interaction is dynamic and often unpredictable. Graduate students observed that learner interpretation of instructions, time constraints, and varying levels of participation influenced how tasks unfolded during the lessons. These discrepancies between planned and enacted lessons became valuable learning opportunities, encouraging students to consider how teaching strategies must be adapted to the realities of classroom interaction.

7. Conclusion

This paper shares a collaborative task-based language teaching (TBLT) project conducted in a graduate-level applied linguistics course in which graduate students designed and implemented task-based lessons for undergraduate English learners at Osaka University. Through the process of lesson design, peer discussion, classroom implementation, and post-lesson reflection, graduate students engaged directly with its key principles by connecting theories to practice. By participating in authentic classroom implementation, the graduate students were able to observe how planned tasks functioned in real teaching contexts and to critically examine the relationship between learning objectives and outcomes. While TBLT is theoretically appealing, its implementation continues to present challenges. Tasks need to be cognitively appropriate, pedagogically coherent, and aligned with learners' proficiency levels and classroom realities, and constraints such as time limitations also need to be considered.

Several limitations of this project need to be acknowledged. This project involved a small number of graduate students and was conducted within a single course context, which limits the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the implementation involved only three classroom lessons and relied on limited data collected from learner surveys and homework submissions. Future collaborative projects could expand this approach by incorporating larger cohorts of graduate students across different courses or programs. Cross-course collaboration could allow students of different areas of applied linguistics to jointly design and implement lessons, thereby enriching their learning experience and perspectives. Future research could also benefit from expanded data collection, including multimodal classroom observations and more systematic learner feedback. Such data would

allow deeper analysis of how tasks are enacted in classroom settings and how learners engage with their tasks, and further contribute to research and practice in TBLT.

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