

Task-based Language Teaching and Grammatical Accuracy

～ An Experiment on Japanese University Students ～

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1. Background

A task is a meaning-focused activity. It gives students many opportunities for interaction and output. Students use language to achieve tasks, so many argue that it is effective in acquiring second language (Mackey, 1999; Van den Branden, 1997). However, some researchers criticize Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) because it is inadequate for the grammar teaching (Sheen, 2003; Swan, 2005). They criticize students cannot improve their grammatical accuracy through meaning-based tasks, but Samuda (2001) revealed that ESL learners could acquire the new language items through TBLT. This experiment was carried out to investigate the effect of TBLT for Japanese learners.

2. Current experiment

2.1 Method

The subjects of this experiment are twenty national university students in Japan. Their major is English education. In this experiment report, they are numbered from one to twenty to ensure anonymity.

First, a pre-test was administered to examine pre-existing levels of familiarity with the target features (For further information, see 2.2 Target features). The pre-test consisted of a free translation test. Students were asked to translate Japanese sentence contexts into English. Before the test, I gave instructions in Japanese. The instructions were as follows.

- ・ Translate the underlined part from Japanese into English
- ・ Translate using as many different expressions as possible
- ・ Do not worry about making spelling and grammar mistakes

Expressions of possibility and probability were not restricted to the target features (For example, ‘seems’, ‘likely’ and so on), so the pre-test asked students to translate as much as possible. Students were tested on whether they could use the target features appropriate for the contexts. The results of the pre-test showed that students had not acquired the target language features.

Second, students were divided into two groups. Each group had ten students. One was a TBLT group and the other was a PPP group. Each group had an English lesson for fifty minutes. To control the teacher variable, I played this role. Audio and video recordings were collected through the lesson. There was no significant difference between both groups in the results of pre-test ($t=0.78$, $df=18$).

Third, students took a post-test (paralleling the pre-test) one week later to examine the effects of the two types of instructions. Before the test, I gave the same instructions as for the pre-test. The test results showed that most students in both groups were able to use the target features more properly than in the pre-test (For further information, see 2.4 Results and analysis).

2.2 Target features

Samuda (2001) stated that ‘the modal auxiliaries *must*, *might*, *may* and *could*, but, although the rules of form for these may be relatively straightforward, the socio-semantic options underpinning the choice of one form over another are more complex, and less easily illuminated.’ (p.125). She focused on these four expressions of probability or possibility in her research.

At first, these four expressions were to be used as target features in this experiment. However, the results of the pre-test revealed that students were not able to use ‘probably’ as an expression of probability. After the discussion with one native speaker (a specialist in English education) and one highly proficient non-native speaker (also a specialist in English education), ‘must’, ‘probably’, ‘might’, ‘may’ and ‘could’, these five expressions were chosen as target features.

2.3 Two types of English classes

2.3.1 TBLT class

The following is the procedure for the TBLT class:

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|--|-------------------------------|
| ① Oral Introduction and Explanation for the task (input) | →8.5 minutes |
| ② Group Work (interaction between students) | →8 minutes (audio recording) |
| ③ Progress Report (interaction between a teacher and students) | →8.5 minutes |
| + | |
| Implicit / Explicit Language Teaching (input) | |
| ④ Group Work (interaction between students) | →13 minutes (audio recording) |
| ⑤ Final Report (interaction between a teacher and students) | →11 minutes |
| ⑥ Ending | →1 minute |

Table 1 TBLT class procedure

① Oral Introduction and Explanation for the task	<p>· The teacher has a bag that someone forgot and takes some things out of it, asking students ‘Who forgot this bag? Make some guesses.’</p> <p>Teacher (T) : Let’s look inside and make some guesses about the owner. First …what’s this?</p> <p>Student (S) : Lip cream.</p> <p>T: Yes, the owner has lip cream in this bag, so is the owner male or female? (pointing at the chart / See Table 3)</p> <p>S: Female!</p> <p>T: Yes, many young girls and women use lip cream, so the owner is female, you think.</p> <p>S: (nodding)</p> <p>T: But recently some boys use lip cream, too!</p> <p>S: Ah! (nodding)</p> <p>T: So…is the owner male?</p> <p>S: Um……</p> <p>T: We’re not sure, but make some guesses from things in this bag. Next…</p>
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② Group Work	<p>· Ten students are divided into three groups (one group of four and two groups of three). In each group, students discuss and fill in the chart. (Example of interaction)</p> <p>Group B S5: Age? S6: Young. S7: I think he is young. Twenties. S5: Maybe, maybe young. S6: Twenty-five to thirty-five? S5: I write 'young' here? S6, 7: Yes.</p>
③ Progress Report	<p>· Each group makes a progress report. The teacher uses the target features in the interaction.</p>
Implicit Language Teaching	<p>T: What did you guess about the owner's gender? S1, 2: Male. S2: Certain. T: OK (filling in the chart), but why? Please tell us. S1: Because he has sports newspaper and...writing. (laughing) T: Ah, writing. (laughing) So, the owner must be male, OK? All: OK.</p>
Explicit Language Teaching	<p>· The teacher introduces the target features to students.</p> <p>T: Group A, you think it's certain the owner is male, OK? All: (nodding) T: Here is another way to say this. When you think it's certain or almost certain, you can use 'must'. So, you can say 'The owner must be male.' (writing it on blackboard) S: Ah... (nodding) Sokka (そっか) ... T: 'Must', (pointing at it on board) this shows you think it's certain or almost certain (pointing at the scale on the chart), so you can say 'The owner must be male', OK?</p>
④ Group Work	<p>· Students go back to the discussion and prepare for the final report. I planned to allow only ten minutes for this stage, but extended the time at the request of the students. (Example of interaction)</p> <p>S1: Maybe student S2: Yeah. S1: Ah, must be? May be? S2: Student! Student!</p>

<p>⑤ Final Report</p> <p>⑥ Ending</p>	<p>S1: Probably? S3: Probably? S2: Probably student? S1: He is probably student. S2: And he may be syukatsusei (就活生). All: Yes.</p> <p>• Students make a final report.</p> <p>T: What did you guess about the owner's hobbies? S8: He probably likes baseball and he must be a fan of AKB. T: OK (filling in the chart). Any other ideas? S8: He might have pollen allergy because he has mask, tissue and eye lotion.</p> <p>• The teacher answers whose bag it is.</p>
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2.3.2 PPP class

The following is the procedure for the ppp class:

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|---|------------------------------|
| ① Presentation (input) | →8 minutes |
| ② Practice (input) | →6.5 minutes |
| ③ Production | |
| • Oral Introduction (input) | →5.5 minutes |
| • Forming Individual Hypothesis | →8.5 minutes |
| • Dialog Practice (input) | →2.5 minutes |
| • Explanation for Pair Work (input) | →2.5 minutes |
| • Pair Work (interaction between students) | →9 minutes (audio recording) |
| • Preparing for Final Report | →1.5 minutes |
| • Final Report (interaction between a teacher and students) | →5 minutes |
| • Ending | →1 minute |

Table 2 PPP class procedure

<p>① Presentation</p>	<p>• The teacher has a bag that someone forgot and takes some things out of it and introduces the target features to the students.</p> <p>T: This owner has put cute pocket tissue and lip cream in this bag. Is the owner male or female? What do you think? S: Male. T: Yeah. Many young girls and women use lip cream and cute character goods, so all of you think the owner is female. Please look at the degree of possibility or probability (pointing at the scale on the chart). All of you think it's certain the owner is female, OK? Here is another way to say this. When you think it's certain or almost certain, you can use 'must'. So, you can say 'The owner must be female.' (writing it on board) 'Must', (pointing at it on board) this shows you think it's certain or almost certain (pointing at the scale on the chart), so you can use 'must'.</p>
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<p>② Practice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students make sentences to practice using the target features. Students also answer why they think so. <p>T: Please look at this picture. This is Ichiro. Do you think he is rich? S: Yes. T: Please make a sentence. He () rich. S: He must be rich. T: OK, you think he must be rich. Why? S: Because...he is a famous baseball player.</p>
<p>③ Production</p>	
<p>Oral Introduction</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are given a worksheet (See Appendix) and also an oral introduction.
<p>Forming Individual Hypothesis</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students make guesses about the owner and fill in the chart. <p>I planned to allow five minutes for this stage, but extended the time at the request of the students.</p>
<p>Dialogue Practice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students read aloud the dialogue on the worksheet individually or in pairs many times.
<p>Explanation for Pair Work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are told to gather information from their partners.
<p>Pair Work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dialogue helps students to exchange their ideas. <p>(Example of interaction) S17: What do you think about job? S20: I think he must be office worker. S17: Must be!? S20: Must be office worker. Because he has sports newspaper and recorder and timetable and receipt pad. I see many businessman read newspaper in the train.</p>
<p>Preparing for final report</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students make guesses again.
<p>Final Report</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same as that of TBLT group, but when students are not able to use the target features correctly, the teacher corrects them. <p>T: What do you think about the owner's hobbies? S19: Maybe...trip. Probably. T: OK. You think the owner probably likes trips. S19: Yes, probably likes trip.</p>
<p>Ending</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Same as that of TBLT group.

Table 3 Extract from the chart used in TBLT group and PPP group

	0% ←————— 50% —————→ 100%	
	possible	probable
Male or Female		
Age		
Single or Married		

2.4 Results and analysis

2.4.1 Results of pre-test and post-test

Table 4 The result of pre-test and post-test in TBLT group (Sub=Subject)

Pre-test							Post-test						
Sub	must	probably	may	might	could	score	must	probably	may	might	could	score	
1	○	×	×	○	×	2/5	×	×	×	×	○	1/5	
2	×	×	○	×	×	1/5	○	○	○	○	×	4/5	
3	×	○	×	○	×	2/5	○	×	○	×	×	2/5	
4	×	×	×	×	×	0/5	×	×	○	×	○	2/5	
5	○	×	○	○	×	3/5	○	○	○	○	×	4/5	
6	×	×	×	○	×	1/5	○	×	○	×	×	2/5	
7	×	×	×	×	×	0/5	○	○	×	×	×	2/5	
8	○	×	○	×	×	2/5	○	○	○	○	×	4/5	
9	×	×	○	×	×	1/5	○	×	×	×	×	1/5	
10	○	×	×	○	×	2/5	○	○	○	○	○	5/5	

Table5 The result of pre-test and post-test in PPP group (Sub=Subject)

Pre-test							Post-test						
Sub	must	probably	may	might	could	score	must	probably	may	might	could	score	
11	×	×	○	×	×	1/5	○	○	○	○	×	4/5	
12	○	×	×	○	×	2/5	○	○	○	○	×	4/5	
13	×	×	×	×	×	0/5	○	×	○	×	×	2/5	
14	○	×	○	×	×	2/5	○	○	○	×	×	3/5	
15	○	×	○	×	×	2/5	○	○	○	×	×	3/5	
16	×	×	×	×	×	0/5	○	○	○	×	×	3/5	
17	×	×	○	×	×	1/5	○	×	○	×	×	2/5	
18	○	×	×	×	×	1/5	○	○	○	×	×	3/5	
19	×	×	○	×	×	1/5	×	×	×	×	×	0/5	
20	×	×	○	×	×	1/5	○	×	○	×	×	2/5	

Results of the t-test showed that there was a significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test in the TBLT group ($t = -3.07$, $df=9$, $p < .05$). There was also a significant difference between the pre-test and the post-test in the PPP group ($t = -4.02$, $df=9$, $p < .05$). In order to examine differences between the effects of TBLT and PPP, a t-test about the differences between the pre-test and post-test of both groups was administered. The difference was calculated by subtracting the pre-test score from the post-test score. The result showed that there was no significant difference between the TBLT group and the PPP group

($t = -0.35$, $df = 18$). That is, both instructions did affect the students' grammatical development and there was no difference of effect between both groups.

We will look at the details of the results. The number of the students who used 'must', 'probably' and 'may' properly increased in the post-test compared with the pre-test. This is true of both groups, with little difference between them.

However, there is almost no change in the number of the students who used 'might' properly in both groups. The existent knowledge ('might is an expression of less possibility than may.') would affect students' use of the words. In PPP group, nobody used 'could' properly in the post-test. Students' speaking in Pair Work was restricted by the dialogue in the PPP group. Did they not have any chances to use 'could'? There were three students from the TBLT group who used 'could' correctly in the post-test, although they did not use 'could' in the task activity. How much of this post-test result (i. e., the three students who used 'could' correctly in the TBLT group.) can be attributed to the task is unclear.

2.4.2 Results of recordings

Table 6 Pre-focus, post-focus and PPP group expressions (the number of expressions)

	Pre-focus	Post-focus	PPP
Known expression			
Maybe	55.8% (24)	16.0% (15)	6.9% (7)
(I'm) sure	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
(I'm) not sure	4.7% (2)	3.2% (3)	0% (0)
I think	16.3% (7)	3.2% (3)	16.8% (17)
Expression from the chart			
Possible	7.0% (3)	13.8% (13)	3.0% (3)
Probable	2.3% (1)	4.3% (4)	0% (0)
Certain	0% (0)	0% (0)	1.0% (1)
Target language features			
Must	2.3% (1)	30.9% (29)	19.8% (20)
Probably	9.3% (4)	19.1% (18)	29.7% (30)
May	0% (0)	3.2% (3)	22.8% (23)
Might	2.3% (1)	5.3% (5)	0% (0)
Could	0% (0)	1.1% (1)	0% (0)

In the TBLT group, 'maybe' was the most widely used as an expression of possibility and probability pre-focus, but its use decreased post-focus: 16.0% compared with 55.8% pre-focus. The target features ('must', 'probably', 'may', 'might' and 'could') all occurred and increased post-focus: around 60% of total expressions.

In the PPP group, the usage percentage of the target features accounted for 70%. The activity used in the Production stage was exchanging information. Students convey new information to others, but they still use language in a predictable range because of the dialogue. William (2004) calls this activity 'Communicative language practice'. This activity focuses more on forms than tasks. The difference between 'Communicative language practice' and tasks would have affected the result. If the activity used in the Production stage had been a task, the result would have been different.

2.5 Discussion

The results of the pre-test and post-test showed that both instructions were effective in grammatical accuracy. Let us again consider the details of both instructions. Each group had an English class that lasted fifty minutes. However, the duration times spent on form-focused teaching and on students' speaking are different. In the PPP group, students were given much time to focus on forms (14.5 minutes= ① + ②, See 2.3.2) than TBLT group (8.5 minutes= ③, See 2.3.1). As for the duration time spent on students' speaking, the TBLT group had more than double (32 minutes= ② + ④ + ⑤, See 2.3.1) compared with the PPP group (14 minutes= ③ Pair work+ Final Report, See 2.3.2). That is, TBLT was able to give students many chances to use target features due to the brief grammar explanation in ③ Progress Report (See 2.3.1). This may suggest that TBLT is more effective for introducing of new language items than PPP.

From the percentage of expressions of probability and possibility (See Table 4), we can see students of the TBLT group started to use the target linguistic features, continuing to use their existent knowledge. This is close to natural language acquisition and suggests that a task would not be just practice for learning grammar. The result of the expressions of the PPP group showed that the students' language use was inclined toward some language items. In the PPP group, the interaction among students was restricted by form-focused teaching and the dialogue. The limited interaction would lead to the limited language use.

Although this experiment showed that grammar instruction in TBLT was effective for Japanese university students, there were four main limitations in this experiment. First, the usage of the target language features, especially 'may', 'might' and 'could' was questionable. In the pre-test, 'may' and 'might' were thought to express the more probability than 'could'. However, after the pre-test, I consulted with a native speaker about the test, who advised changing the usage of 'could'. As a result of this discussion, I decided to regard 'may', 'might' and 'could' as expressions for almost the same possibility. Some dictionaries or grammar books may define these expressions differently (For example, 'might' is defined as expressions for the less possibility than 'may'). We should recognize the difference between definitions in dictionaries and actual use by native speakers. In order to generalize these expressions to some extent, I should have carried out a pilot-test using native speakers and highly proficient non-native speakers before doing this experiment.

Second, the instructions did not go as I had planned. For example, in the TBLT group, task activity after form-focused teaching (④ Group Work, See 2.3.1) was planned to last about ten minutes (almost the same time as pre-focus), but the time was extended at the students' request. The difference of time between pre-focus (eight minutes) and post-focus (thirteen minutes) would affect the rate of expressions of probability and possibility in the TBLT group.

The third is about experimental control. This is one of the major problems about the comparison of teaching methods. For example, Baretta and Davies (1985) evaluated Prabhu's (1987) project. They compared the Communicational Language Teaching Project (CTP – a version of TBLT) to the Structural-Oral-Situational approach (a version of PPP). Their evaluation project showed that there were two problems facing them in comparison of methods: experimental control and test content bias.

For the valid experiment, we have to control the environment, for example, the sex, age, background, proficiency in language of learners, and so on. However, all variables cannot be controlled in a real school environment. Even if it were possible to control these variables, another problem would occur. Does what occurs in these sorts of laboratory conditions occur in real school environments? To what extent variables should be controlled is a major problem.

In regards to test content bias, Baretta and Davies (1985) stated that 'It was clear that if we used tests that were solely CTP-based, we would be unfair to the structural group, and vice versa. The problem is a

familiar one in educational research.’ (p.123). Baretta and Davies prepared a series of tests to solve this problem. The series consisted of five tests: a structure test, a task-based test and three neutral tests (a contextualized grammar test, a dictation test and a listening/reading comprehension test). As a result, the TBLT group did better in the task-based test and the neutral tests. This result may suggest that TBLT is a better way of teaching language than the traditional method. However, Baretta and Davies (1985) pointed out that ‘The impossibility of full experiment control and the potential for bias in test construction make generalization impossible.’ (p.126). We should consider these limitations when looking at the results.

In my experiment, the tests required students to translate sentences from Japanese into English with consideration to contexts. Neither the TBLT group nor the PPP group practiced such activity (translation), so the test was neutral for both groups. In order to confirm the validity of the two groups, a t-test about the result of pre-test was administered. However, we must look at the details of the subjects (See table 4, 5). The pre-test result showed that five students in the TBLT group could use ‘might’, but only one student in the PPP group could use ‘might’. In further experiments, the subjects should be divided equally based on an individual target language item. Then, we would be able to trace the effects on each language item.

Finally, the number or the quality of the subjects may not be sufficient for generalization (although we already know the difficulties of generalization). In my experiment, the subjects were twenty students. This number may be too small for generalization, so the result in my experiment may not be applied to general Japanese university students. As for the quality of the subjects, they are national university students whose major is English education. Their level of English is thought to be above the average for general Japanese university students. What would happen if the same experiment was carried out for other students of higher or lower levels? This should be investigated in further experiments.

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Appendix Extract from the worksheet used in PPP group

Who is the owner of this bag?

You are detectives. You found a bag that someone forgot. Let's look some things in this bag and make some guesses about the owner!

- ① First, make some guesses about the owner for yourself and write in your chart.
- ② Make pairs and exchange guesses.

(Example of dialogue)

A: What do you think about the owner's job?

B: The owner is probably an office worker.

A: Why?

B: Because of the timetable. The office workers often go to business trips, so they need timetables.