

An Examination of Task-based Syllabus Design: Issues Concerning Task-based Designs and their Potential Use in Japanese Colleges

by
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Task-based syllabus designs, and particularly task-based language teaching, are promising alternative approaches to second language learning, but they are also approaches which are controversial. A task-based syllabus differs from other syllabus designs in emphasizing real life tasks or learning tasks, rather than language input or decontextualized practice. The question of using task as a basis of syllabus design is less of an issue than the various ways in which it can be implemented. The controversy in professional literature revolves more around the advocates of task-based syllabus adhering to curricular views which have heightened the controversy. The main purpose of this article is to provide a much needed overview of task-based language teaching in the context of the philosophies underlying it, and of the various arguments surrounding it, in easily understood language.

Task-based syllabus designs have been well known in the second language acquisition research community and the curriculum specialist community for sometime and articles both supporting and condemning such designs have been published in numerous books and journals. However, these commentaries tend not to present enough information at any one time for those outside of the research community to comprehend the issues involved. This article will not be concerned with only the specifics of task-based syllabus design, but it will attempt to draw the connections between general trends of thought in the teaching profession to the specifics of task-based design so that a larger community can appreciate the issues surrounding its use. A secondary purpose for this overview is to provide interested teachers with the essential background on task-based teaching, so that we can then discuss whether task-based language teaching is appropriate for use with college level students in Japan.

Second language teachers are often confronted with students who have already failed to gain very much of the target language and are unmotivated when presented with a similar methodology to what they have already experienced. The process of acquiring another language is so difficult that most attempts at learning another language end in either partial or complete failure. (Long and Crookes, 1992, 34). Numerous "communicative" and "humanistic" approaches have developed in the past decade, one of which is task-based

teaching. Innovation has provided some positive effects, but others feel that there is a spirit of innovation which has caused more disruption than benefit. (Sheen, 1994, 127) To appreciate how this struggle for a better methodology has been influenced, we must briefly look at the theoretical source: the work of curriculum theorists.

Curricular Arguments

Curriculum theory has a bewildering array of conflicting schools of thought. Few of us in teaching have studied these theories and their underlying philosophies per se, although we can easily recognize them when we encounter them. Methodological paradigms, and the claims which are made in support of them, are derived from the curricular philosophy to which they have an affinity. To fully appreciate the arguments surrounding various syllabus designs, especially innovative approaches, we should begin by discussing the general curricular ideologies from which they come.

Tradition has been the strongest factor in curriculum design in almost every country and for all areas of education, including second and foreign language teaching (Jackson 1992, 22). Another major factor has been the dominance of textbooks in formal education. It has been estimated that text materials today still dominate 75 percent of classroom time for students in some countries and 90 percent of homework time. (Apple, 1986, 85). Students in many countries may have difficulty in accepting a course which does not use a text. Although one would expect the percentage of classroom time related to a textbook to be less in the case of second and foreign language instruction, there remains a tremendous reliance upon textbooks, both as materials within the classroom and for shaping curriculums. One expert has asserted that, "textbook writers are de-facto curriculum specialists." (Uhrmacher, 1993, 3) There can be little doubt that textbook writers adhere to some curricular theory, which is then communicated in the classroom through their texts.

It is instructive that the term curriculum actually means "a race course," from the Latin verb *currere* meaning "to run a race." Those who wanted curriculum reform have felt that the mentality of putting students through a "course of studies" was inappropriate. If curriculum reform seeks a different premise for its design than traditional instruction, then the question becomes which alternative premise do we choose? To extend the analogy, some curricular theorists have sought to build a better race course, while others have sought to abandon race courses altogether. It is upon ideologies about the purpose of education that the concept of curriculum and the teacher's role have been changed and continue to change.

Curricular Ideologies

There are seven ideologies which have developed in the twentieth century: Rational Humanism, Developmentalism, Reconceptualism, Cognitive Pluralism, Critical Theory, Multiculturalism, and Eclecticism. Each of these ideologies have had an impact on language teaching; however, space in this article will allow for discussion of only Developmentalism, Reconceptualism, Cognitive Pluralism and Eclecticism.

Developmentalism emphasizes fitting the curriculum to the needs and interests of the student-instructing students at their level of development. Growing out of the work of Jean Piaget and Eleanor Duckworth, Developmentalism stresses working effectively within the student's developmental level, rather than attempting to speed up the learning process. Learners need freedom to experiment, freedom to make mistakes, and freedom to spend time developing. Although this ideology is often associated with the education of young children, it has also had its effects on other areas of education as well. As it relates to second and foreign language learning, developmentalism supposes levels, even fixed levels, of development and the belief that instruction must be appropriate to the level of the student. The centering of the curriculum around the developmental needs of the student, rather than the content to be learned, leads naturally to theories of student centered education, and in particularly the so-called "humanistic approaches" of second language instruction. These approaches are usually characterized by less concern about outcomes, than upon creating opportunities for the learner to develop.

Reconceptualism emphasizes learning through experience-- education based upon enhancement and appreciation rather than on utilitarian objectives. Reconceptualism challenges the assumption that education is for some social purpose. They feel that learning should be based upon person purpose and an understanding gained through experience. Reconceptualism employs a number of ideas derived from psychology, philosophy and literature. The strong emphasis upon active learning and learning based upon personal enhancement from reconceptualism has been a clear influence on second language instructional theory, particularly on communicative approaches.

Cognitive Pluralism emphasizes multiple types of instruction to reach and develop a variety of intelligences in the student. The goal is to enhance cognitive development, including non-traditional cognitive skills. Cognitive Pluralism is a rejection of the notions that intelligence is a single phenomenon. Adherents feel that the singular use of "propositional language" excludes a number of other viable means of expression. They favor the use of a variety of media, learning environments and teaching relationships.

Eclecticism contends that no one theory is satisfactory for the wide diversity of students, therefore a mix of theories is the only reliable approach available. Adherents believe that it is better to be deliberative regarding the arguments of various theories, than to be dogmatic towards any one of them. In fact, most theorists, and most educators, have a mixture of viewpoints or may adhere to several ideologies, despite their conflicts.

This list of ideologies is not exhaustive, but it represents the major themes of curriculum theorists since the mid-twentieth century. A salient point regarding EFL and ESL teaching is that of the seven ideologies listed above, all of them are student centered, while six of them are dramatically student centered theories. This paradigm shift from a content centered approach towards a student centered approach has had and will continue to have a profound influence on syllabus design. Also, it is important to note that these ideologies have also caused considerable amount of conflict within teaching communities.

Behaviorism, Cognitivism and Acquisition

Several other powerful influences have shaped syllabus design in second language teaching directly and prepared the way for the types of alternative syllabus design of which task-based teaching is an example. The interweaving of the curricular theories mentioned above with viewpoints about how language is learned from Behaviorism, Cognitivism and, more recently, Second Language Acquisition, have produced a number of competing beliefs on language instruction.

In 1920, Watson and Raynor described a theory of conditioning behavior in humans. But it was not until 1957 with the publishing of B.F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* that language learning was thought to be brought about by conditioning. Behaviorism influenced the language teaching of the day, most notably the audio-lingual method. The audio-lingual method is still in use, but its influence has diminished. In 1959, Noam Chomsky published his "Review of Verbal Behavior," a now legendary attack which many consider the defeat of behaviorism. (Lyons, 1970) Chomsky argued that, "Language is not a form of behavior...on the contrary, it is an intricate rule-based system and a large part of language acquisition is the learning of that system." (Harmer, 1991, 33) Cognitivism, or mentalism as it is sometimes called, did not develop into any particular teaching methodology as behaviorism had, but its influence is still powerfully felt.

The most controversial influence on second and foreign language teaching has been the acquisition theorists, notably Stephen Krashen's "The Input Hypothesis" in 1981 and 1984, and in *The Natural Approach* with Terrell in 1983. Krashen argued that there is a difference

between learning a language and acquiring a language. Krashen characterized learning a language as "knowing about" the language, whereas acquiring a language is to go through a similar psycholinguistic process that we did when learning our initial language.

Krashen argued that students would learn faster from language samples which were slightly higher than their present level of competence-what he referred to as "comprehensible input" or "rough tuned" input. Corder (1967), whom Krashen has cited, wrote about the difference between what is given to learners and what they actually take in- "arguing that L2 (second language) input must be comprehended if it is to become intake to assist the acquisition process." (Pica, 1994, 55)

Those who adhere to acquisition theory interpret research findings as showing that acquisition is clearly superior to learning both in terms of gaining the language and in retention over time. Critics claim that it is unclear whether someone has acquired or has learned at any particular time. (Sharwood-Smith, 1981) Also, critics point out that research findings have so far been inconclusive. (Sheen, 1994,) It is not so much the importance of comprehensible input, as it is Krashen's position that such input alone is sufficient for the learner to acquire the language. Tereasa Pica recently wrote the following,

Many researchers have not been able to agree with Krashen's ideas about the sufficiency of comprehension to successful language acquisition. However, the overall consensus among most of them is that comprehension is a major contributor to L2 learning. (Pica, 1994, 55)

Additional issues raised in this debate are whether an approach based upon Krashen's theory is more effective than traditional methods and whether a Krashen approach results in more authentic language production.

Arguments Surrounding Comprehensible Input

Krashen's advocacy of comprehensible input is a direct contradiction of previous linguistic approaches which favored word frequency and the explicit teaching of formal systems as a basis for language study. The sequencing and presentation of language to a student could be quite different if it is based upon research findings about what must be learned (linguistic approach), as opposed to sequencing and presentation of language based upon how a person learns language (acquisition approach).

An often overlooked but essential part of comprehensible input is that those items which

can be defined as comprehensible may depend largely upon the level of development that the student has in the target language. Developmental levels have been identified for language learning, however developmental stages may vary depending upon socio-psychological factors. (Meisel, Clahsen and Pienemann, 1981, 110)

Jeremy Harmer questions whether the distinction between learnt language and acquired language is a lasting one in the mind of the student. He points out,

Learnt language which is practiced does seem to become part of the acquired store even though it may be the case that only certain grammatical features are susceptible to such treatment. It has been suggested (by R. Ellis) that freer practice activities (communicative activities especially) may act as a switch which allows consciously learnt language to transfer to the acquired store. (Harmer, 1991, 38)

This mysterious "switch" that can convert learnt language into acquired language may have some recent evidence to support it. A recent book by Nattinger and DeCarico, entitled *Lexical Phrases and Language Teaching*, is based upon the idea that a large part of language use is dependent upon the use of phrasal grammar, mentioned, notably, by Chomsky. (Lyons, 1970) Significantly, it is thought that these lexical phrases act to free the language user's mind so that it can focus on what it wants to say, rather than on how it is saying it. In a recent review of Nattinger and DeCarico's work by Zoltan Dornyei, Dornyei made the following observations,

Several publications in the past 15 years have highlighted the importance of formulaic language chunks (i.e., multiword phrases and routines treated as single lexical units) in both L1 and L2 use. Although these chunks are variously referred to by different authors as gambits, conventionalized language forms, lexical phrases, conversational routines, prepatterned speech, lexicalized sentence stems, partially pre-assembled patterns, or formulaic constructions, all these authors agree that such chunks play a more significant role in language production than is normally acknowledged. Native speakers of a language are in command of thousands of language chunks and use them as building blocks in their speech. (Dornyei, 1994, 640)

There seems to be nothing exceptional about the use of lexical phrases, but when we look into how they are employed in language use a correspondence develops between lexical phrases, developmental stages and comprehensible input. Dornyei continues,

The retrieval of these chunks is cognitively relatively undemanding, which allows

the speaker to attend to other aspect of communication and to plan larger pieces of discourse. L2 learners, on the other hand, often put sentences together from scratch, that is, word by word, which takes up their cognitive capacity and does not let them achieve nativelike fluency.

One could easily extend this to say that at lower levels of development, or even at higher levels where the learner uses a halting, stilted or flawed language, the student may be processing the new language without the benefit of these lexical phrases and is therefore less efficient at production. One could theorize that if the student who has halting language were to somehow learn or acquire the use of lexical phrases, the result would be more fluent speech. Some syllabus designers have reasoned that if students are producing language on a word by word basis, then by instructing them with simplified language samples they may be actually reinforcing such inefficient production; but if Krashen is correct, then the providing of more difficult samples might provide the learner with some of those lexical phrases which seem to be so useful. More to the point, the lexical phrases, or something akin to them, could be the switch between learnt and acquired states. Significantly, it appears from this line of reasoning that comprehensible input with communicative activities is quite a promising strategy for triggering acquisition.

Long and Crookes argue more forcefully that methods which focus only on the forms in the target language, and especially those which use simplified language samples, do indeed produce stilted language.

Syllabus designers who choose a linguistic element-- word, structure, notion, or function-as the organizational unit... This approach is notorious, however, for producing stilted samples of the target language-artificial because they are written to conform to a set of linguistic specifications supposedly defining 'levels of proficiency,' and so do not reflect how people speak or write (much less learn) the language concerned... Beyond the lack of authenticity, [these] syllabuses are flawed because they assume a model of language acquisition unsupported by research findings on language learning in or out of the classrooms. Where morphosyntax is concerned, research shows that people do not learn isolated items in the L2 one at a time, in additive, linear fashion, but as parts of complex mappings of groups of form-function relationships. (Long & Crookes, 1992, 30-31)

Not only do Long and Crookes argue that such syllabus types produce stilted language, but that such syllabus types do not correspond to developmental stages. Later in the same context, Long and Crookes make this observation,

Both naturalistic and classroom learners pass through fixed developmental sequences in word order, negation, questions, relative clauses, and so on—sequences which have to include often quite lengthy stages of non-targetlike use of forms...As indicated, these developmental sequences seem to be impervious to instruction, presumably because linguistic items have to be comprehensible and processable before they are learnable and, hence, teachable.

This last point leads naturally to a different learning scenario which results in a different kind of flawed language, but for surprisingly similar reasons to those being discussed. Rather than suffering an inefficient word assembly process, a student might at some point choose to utilize a pidginized form (such as deleting part of speech, not reforming words for grammatical correctness, etc.) of the language in order to concentrate on discourse. This improperly formed speech may be performing much the same function of what lexical phrases do in more developed learners.

We interpret both kinds of deletions as instances of restrictive simplification which is applied to minimize processing efforts when using the foreign language. Communication is not severely hindered by these deletions since the missing elements can easily be filled in these contexts... (Meisel, Clahsen, & Pienemann, 1981, 121)

Of course, the connection between the efficiency of using larger "chunks" of language to Krashen's comprehensible input is attractive: by being presented with authentic samples of language, the student would discern for themselves patterns within the language and discover these "chunks." Similarly, if errors based upon the need to process the new language resist conventional instruction, then exposure to comprehensible input appropriate to the developmental level, with time and a learning environment to process it in, might result in modifications of pidginized language being used, thus moving the learner into a higher developmental level.

The foregoing reasoning does not prove Krashen's theories, but it does demonstrate why they are so influential. Notice, however, that the foregoing discussion necessarily related productive language with comprehensible input, thus the use of communicative activities. Studies of the French Immersion program in Canada have led to the conclusion that comprehensible input may affect receptive language skills more than productive skills, and have concluded that communicative output is needed. (Swain, 1994)

Before leaving the discussion on curricular and theoretical influences, it is worth noting

that arguments affecting syllabus design roughly fall into the following groupings of opposing emphasis: form or meaning; what is to be learned or how it is to be learned; teacher centered or student centered; deductive or inductive.

Task-Based Approach

In the 1970's, the British applied linguist R. Allright conducted an experiment which used "tasks" rather than formal language instruction with satisfying results. (Harmer, 1991, 30) Allright felt that if students were given tasks in which they had to use English, then learning the structure of the language would come automatically.

In 1979 The Bangalore/Madras Communicational Teaching Project in Southern India was started by N.S. Prabhu and his associates. In this project, which ran until 1984, the guiding principle was "that form could be best learned when the learner's attention was focused on meaning." (Beretta, 1989, 283) In Prabhu's own words, students were to learn, "not 'English for communication' but 'English through communication'; not 'learn English so that will be able to do and say things later' but 'do and say things now so that as a result you will learn English'." (Prabhu, 1980, 23).

The Bangalore project was the first attempt of its kind to put innovative theories of language learning into a long term (five years), large scale practical trial. The Bangalore project used a task-based syllabus called a *Procedural Syllabus*, which consisted of predetermined lists of tasks which were then paired with pre- tasks which introduced the main tasks in a whole class format. Following this whole class activity the students would usually work individually on the main task.

Criticism of the Bangalore Project reflect the project's pioneering status. For example, one of the major complaints was the lack of systematic evaluation within the project's design, even though objective evaluation may have been inconsistent with the Project's philosophy. (Long & Crookes, 1992) More substantive critiques questioned the guiding principle of a focus on meaning rather than a form focus which was fundamental to Prabhu, Allright and Krashen's work. (Beretta, 1989; Long, 1988).

It should be noted that the Bangalore Project was comprised of very large classes which required a teacher fronted presentation, and which reduced opportunities for using language among the participants. Beretta noted an increase in errors when the task type was altered to increase student production. Prabhu felt that reception had to develop before production, therefore Prabhu created an environment wherein students were not "forced" to produce

language. An interesting commentary on this has come from studies on the Canadian French Immersion Program by Swain, who points out that students in the French Immersion program were better at receptive skills than at productive skills. Pica in referring to Swain's studies states, "For Swain, therefore, opportunities to hear comprehensible input are not sufficient to ensure successful L2 learning. Learners need opportunities to modify the interlanguage production and thereby to produce what Swain refers to as comprehensible output." (Pica, 1994, 58)

In reviewing various approaches to learning, Jeremy Harmer had the following remarks,

It is precisely because of the limitations that many teachers have to face that the Bangalore Project is so impressive. The classes were large and the conditions less than ideal, but despite this the results which have so far been published have been encouraging. Maybe here is proof that conscious learning does not really have a place in the classroom after all. And yet three worries about this position emerge: in the first place many of Prabhu's tasks give rise to very concentrated examples of particular grammar patterns and structures even if the students do not have to take part in actual production drills. This often looks very much like the conscious learning the project aims to replace. Secondly, Prabhu does not encourage groupwork, citing the conditions which his teachers work in and the size of classes etc., and yet this makes the use of humanistic and cooperative techniques very difficult, and thirdly it is by no means certain that the approach adopted in the Bangalore project is the best and only way of teaching English (as opposed to a good way-one of many). (Harmer, 1991, 39)

A quite different approach is the *Process Syllabus* designs which were advocated from the 1980's by those who felt that the standard syllabus was interventionist and authoritarian in nature. These theorists believe that the focus should be on the learner and not on the language or language learning method. One way of accomplishing this is by negotiating the syllabus between the students and the teacher as the learning progresses-hence the name "process" syllabus. Task as a basis for process syllabus were proposed by Michael Breen and Christopher Candlin, who characterized their methodology in the following,

Language learning within a communicative curriculum is most appropriately seen as communicative interaction involving all the participants in the learning and including the various material resources on which the learning is exercised. Therefore, language learning may be seen as a process which grows out of the interaction between learners, teachers, texts and activities. (Breen and Candlin,

1980)

Breen and Candlin suggest that process syllabus design would include a mixture of predetermined, student-teacher negotiated and supplemental items. (Breen and Candlin, 1980) Critics of process syllabus designs argue that field testing of these theories is needed, that assumptions about the abilities of learners and teachers may be unrealistic. Also there is concern that such a radical change in the roles of teachers and students would be unacceptable in some countries or school situations. Others feel that the grading of tasks would be problematic and that a process derived syllabus might exclude tasks which are essential for future needs. (Long and Crookes, 1992)

Task-based Language Teaching

Michael Long and Graham Crookes of the University of Hawaii have proposed an alternative task-based syllabus design which is intended to address the criticism of previous task-based designs. *Task-based Language Teaching* (TBTL), as their design is called, separates tasks into "target tasks," tasks which students need to be able to perform in everyday life, and "pedagogic tasks," which are a series of sub-tasks necessary to accomplish a given target task.

A needs analysis would be made to identify and then grade the target tasks. The procedures for doing this needs analysis would be based upon those used successfully by English for Special Purposes specialists. The pedagogic tasks are then derived from each target task and then sequenced to form the complete syllabus. This overall structure creates a pre-determined syllabus, rather than the negotiated process syllabus referred to above. However, even though the sequence and types of tasks are predetermined, the details of the task, such as time, location, features, etc., can be negotiated between the class participants. In this sense a TBLT syllabus would be a mix of previous task-based proposals.

Long and Crookes cite evidence from research which claims that a focus on form can aid rather than hinder second language acquisition. (Long & Crookes, 1992, 42-43) What is meant by a "focus on form" is not instruction on discrete parts of speech or grammar, rather it is the "use of pedagogic tasks and other methodological options which draw the students attention to aspects of the target language code."

A criticism of Long and Crookes' proposed design was included in a larger article on task-based syllabus designs by Ron Sheen of Tottori University. Sheen's most damaging claim is that Long and Crookes have not been able to demonstrate that a task-based syllabus is more

effective than more conventional approaches. He argues that "What is clearly needed is research into the relative beneficial effects of specific forms of instruction in specific contexts, taking into account the classroom behaviors of all concerned."

Although Long and Crookes' proposal is well conceived, it is a proposal, nevertheless. As should be clear from the tracing of arguments within this article, positions and criticisms are heavily influenced by ideological viewpoints. The interpreting of research findings is also dependent upon these viewpoints. What is needed are implementation studies which can demonstrate the viability of task-based language teaching. Indeed, Long and Crookes, agree with this contention, noting, "A few programs have been reported that reflect some principles of Task-based Language Teaching...but no complete program has been implemented and subjected to the kind of rigorous, controlled evaluation we think essential." (Long & Crookes, 1994)

Tasked-based Teaching in Japanese Colleges

Where would task-based designs be appropriate in a Japanese college? The best answer to this question depends upon the objectives of the program and the level of the students involved. What we do not know from the research community is what level of learner will benefit most from different types of instruction. Programs with students who are failing to benefit from more traditional forms of instruction may wish to investigate these syllabus designs. However, given the administrative and environmental restrictions at many Japanese colleges, I feel that task-based designs may not be appropriate at this time, except on an experimental basis.

My purpose in tracing ideological influences in this article has been not only to explain the controversy surrounding task-based teaching, but to point out that these designs can be altered to fit whatever inclinations a teacher may have. Clearly the foregoing theoretical arguments can not prove the case for any particular syllabus of task-based teaching; they are logical arguments based upon research findings which can only justify a particular advocacy. Potentially, task-based designs could be adapted to be compatible with a number of curricular viewpoints. It would be unfortunate, indeed, if actual classroom experimentation with these designs in a variety of configurations does not occur. Task activities are a reasonable addition to any syllabus, but the use of a task-based syllabus may not have wide application in Japanese college programs until there is more evidence of it being effective.

However, in view of the research cited in this article and in consideration of the larger trends both within and surrounding our field, I believe that it will be just a matter of time

before we will see task-based syllabus designs in Japanese colleges.

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〔1994年12月10日受理〕