Task-Based Language Teaching for Low-Proficiency Students at University

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1. Introduction

Demography is destiny, it is said. Perhaps nowhere is this adage more applicable than in Japan. The social, cultural and economic fabric of the nation is being transformed substantially by unrelenting alteration of its population structure. The effects apply as well to university education. The 18-year-old population in Japan peaked at 2.05 million in 1992 and has fallen steadily to 1.21 million at present as a result of one of the lowest fertility rates in the world which reached a low of 1.26 in 2005. These numbers amount to a 41 percent drop in the pool of high school graduates from which is drawn almost all entering university students. As a consequence, the phenomenon of “free-pass” universities was defined more than a decade ago as those that accept virtually all students who apply, regardless of whether a formal test and/or interview must be taken for admission, in order to sustain enrollment for survival (Shuukan Asahi, 2000). By 2009, nearly half of all the private universities in the country failed to meet their enrollment quotas for that academic year.

As a result, most universities, particularly those that do not enjoy a high level of prominence, are increasingly filling places with students that are found lacking in fundamental academic skills and orientation for university level studies. Many of the students entering universities on a “free pass” bring to campus the baggage of poor and inappropriate academic and personal behavior (Porcaro, 2002). This includes: coming to classes late or not at all; not bringing required books and papers or even notebooks, pens and pencils; not doing homework; being inattentive and having private conversations in class, usually in the rearmost of the room; exiting the classroom to use their mobile phones; and exhibiting manners that are less than expected of mature and courteous young adults. Ironically, the much maligned university entrance examination system seems to have served in the past at least to impart to students a respect for effort, self-discipline, and individual responsibility. Now, as more and more students do not have to go through this rigorous system to enter a university, there seems to be a widespread breakdown of this ethic. (Quite another dimension of these circumstances is the seemingly increasing number of students with mental health issues now enrolling in colleges and universities in Japan. [See Amundrud, 2010.])
In these circumstances, about two-thirds of the universities in Japan now offer high school level supplementary lessons and other special measures for freshmen students in order to deal with the demonstrated insufficiencies in academic ability of many of these students (The Japan Times, 2010). These deficiencies are the result, in part, of the relaxed education policy (“yutori kyouiku”) followed over several previous decades from elementary school to high school, which was established by the Ministry of Education and only recently abolished, as well as the aforementioned easier or non-existent university entrance examinations related to the declining birth rate.

This paper examines task-based language teaching (TBLT) as an instructional approach that addresses the needs of those students at the lowest levels of proficiency in university English language classes and relates the achievement that is possible in these circumstances. The descriptions are based on action research, which may be defined broadly as an "inquiry teachers undertake to understand and improve their own practices" (Mingucci, 1999, citing Winter). It is a process in which teachers identify and resolve the practical problems and issues they encounter in their everyday classroom instruction by formulating a plan of action, implementing it, and then reflecting on the results for the purpose of assessment and revision of the plan in order to enhance further classroom practice. Reflective action research generates knowledge about particular educational settings, learners, and teaching practices. Thus, it adds to the scholarship of teaching and not only bears significance for the teacher’s own instructional setting but also contributes to the base of acquired knowledge for the field of teaching English as a foreign language itself.

2. Task-based language teaching

Although reaching a consensus on a definition and the dimensions of a task has been problematic (Littlewood, 2004; Harmer, 2009), Ellis (2003, p. 16) provides perhaps the clearest and most comprehensive unified description of a task in the context of English language learning. “A task is a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the
real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes.”

Willis & Willis (2009) likewise emphasize that with a task-based approach “learners actively engage in meaning focused activities” (p. 3), essential for second language acquisition, adding that success is “measured in terms of non-linguistic outcome rather than accurate use of language forms” (p. 4). They also make clear the role of the teacher to provide communicative tasks that are appealing and relevant to learners’ interests and thus maximize their engagement.

Willis (1998) outlines the components of a TBLT framework as a pre-task phase, a task cycle, and a post-task phase. The pre-task phase includes the teacher’s introduction of the topic with the class, highlighting some useful words and phrases, and having students understand the task instructions with a clear model of what is expected. As Ellis (2006) points out, it is important that the teacher frame the assigned task and present it in a way that motivates students’ performance. Indeed, with low proficiency, academically underperforming classes it is particularly vital that teachers enliven the topic for students and stir up their energetic attention to the task. The task cycle includes students doing the assigned task in pairs or small groups, while the teacher monitors, facilitates, and encourages their work. Student reports to the class can follow the completion of the task. Finally, in the post-task phase, a language focus component may include analysis and practice of new words, phrases, and patterns utilized in the performance of the task. Ellis (2006), however, again notes usefully that some matters of form, in fact, can be addressed as well in the other phases of the task-based lesson.

The Willises make clear that a task-based instructional approach starts with lexis and follows with some appropriate degree of grammar after the task cycle. The teacher does not prescribe language forms for the task, though Wicking (2009) prudently advises that “the task should be designed in such a way as to constrain language use, so that the linguistic options are limited.” Willis (2004, p. 5) delineates as one of the jobs of the teacher “to create activities which require learners to make use of what language they have. In the early stages this will probably involve little more than stringing words and phrases together. We need to provide positive encouragement as they do this, accepting their success in meaning making, and playing down their grammatical shortcomings.”
This instructional approach is supported by Hoey’s theory of “lexical priming”. Lowe (2010, p. 6) explains succinctly that according to this account of language learning, “grammar is not a pre-existing system: it develops in the wake of lexis” as opposed to the assertion of classical theory that grammar precedes lexis. A functional system of grammar is built up gradually “in order to help us clarify our meaning.” Lloyd (2009, p. 5) explains further that Hoey’s theory “asserts that a word is acquired through encounters with it in speech and writing, so that knowledge of the word includes knowledge of how that word is used for communicative purposes.” Moreover, just as a word is used in the company of other particular words, so it is “primed to occur in or with a particular grammatical function” (p. 7). Thus, the inclusion of a post-task focus on form in the realistic and meaningful context of the defined task supports communicative language acquisition.

An indispensable element of TBLT is pair or group work. (In my own lessons, almost always pair work is employed, only very rarely small group work.) This instructional mode promotes responsible and autonomous practice on the part of students. In its operation, even classes of low proficiency university students who lack a fundamental academic orientation can approach achievement of some of the principal aspects of cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999). Students can readily perceive that they are positively interdependent with their partner(s) for the accomplishment of the assigned tasks. At the same time, they recognize that the teacher holds each one individually accountable for the performance of the tasks. The face-to-face interaction among students in their cooperative effort addresses the development of personal relationships and social skills essential for their mutual success in the completion of the tasks. For many Japanese university students, after six years of rigid teacher-centered instruction through middle school and high school, these skills have atrophied since their active use during elementary school years (see Porcaro, 2001). Teachers maximize the opportunity for students to act in these ways and achieve these ends by effectively facilitating, managing, and monitoring their work.

TBLT, indeed, fits into a broader holistic instructional approach that integrates language and content. Blanton (1992, p. 291) notes that such a unit of instruction is likely to be successful if it meets the following criteria.

1. It engages students’ interest.

2. It requires students to communicate meaningfully.
3. It surrounds students with language that they can understand.

4. It challenges students to think.

5. It provides students with the opportunity to interact with others.

6. It presents students with tasks to perform.

7. It requires students to listen, speak, read, and write.

8. It is student-centered, while being content-oriented.

9. It integrates language functions and language skills.

10. It increases students’ self-confidence and self-respect.

3. TBLT for low-proficiency learners

Teaching English to low-proficiency learners with a low academic orientation at university involves some singular considerations. In many instances these students take only one general English course to fulfill curriculum credit requirements. It has no specific purpose for them. It is not part of an integrated English language curriculum or even related to the coursework in their majors. Almost none of them will take any further English courses ever or need to use English in their jobs. Thus, the English course stands by itself. The low proficiency level of some students extends to the fact that they can hardly read or write at all in English. Moreover, many simply are not comfortable in an academic environment and lack certain basic expected behaviors, attitudes, and discipline for university studies. Their sense of the expectations of their teachers is often inappropriate or confused. Furthermore, they surely have had quite unsuccessful experiences in the previous six years of middle school and high school and have come to fear and feel hostile toward any English language instruction. These factors, however, should not be viewed as impossible impediments to a successful and satisfying course of instruction. Indeed, they provide a challenging opportunity for teachers to apply their craft and achieve meaningful and productive outcomes with the course.

Teaching English in these circumstances is a very personal undertaking in many respects. Teachers need to establish their own mission for the course instruction based on their personal educational philosophy and practical instructional experience and expertise. The instructional materials and methodologies employed will be devised by each teacher to fit the defined goals and objectives of the mission which suit the limited
English language proficiency and academic preparedness of the students. Likewise, the manner of classroom management that is essential to an effective course of instruction will be implemented according to the teacher’s own sensibilities and personal skills.

Finally, for teachers to sustain their efforts in this setting, their motivation must be firmly rooted and well-founded. It must go beyond simply a strong desire to advance students’ learning and their personal development. Often that is not enough to sustain teachers for long when they encounter mounting frustrations and disappointments in their attempts to fulfill those ends. They may become disillusioned and demoralized all too soon. At the same time, it is no more than a pretext to claim, after all, that learning is the responsibility of each student, as a means to relieve these feelings of deficiency. In every lesson I expect from students what I know they are capable of doing and I use all of my skills and force of personality to have them approach that end and to do so willingly and with satisfaction. I am exacting and demanding in my classes, and I am rewarded for that. However much learner autonomy is a goal, my students’ learning is always my responsibility and I am always accountable for it. Yet, there must be something more to it. A teacher must have “fire in the belly” and simply love to be in a classroom, love the process of teaching itself, for all its complexities, and be in it for himself as much as for his students. Indeed, meaning for me as a teacher is drawn from and defined by the daily classroom experience itself, and each teacher must construct that meaning for himself. The process might be said to be existential in nature as we make choices freely based on our experiences, beliefs, and outlook, and take full responsibility for the teacher we are.

4. Advantages of TBLT

Frost (2004) relates some of the advantages of employing TBLT, which are particularly germane for classes of university students with low English proficiency and the aforementioned academic and personal characteristics. The fact that “students are free of language controls” and must utilize all their language resources is an advantage precisely because of their linguistic limitations. Focus on the accurate use of selected language forms would be particularly frustrating and unproductive, and pointless given the absence of purpose for most of these students beyond the meaning established in the classroom for the tasks themselves and their performance of the prescribed activities. Tasks that provide a context that is meaningful and relevant for the students will have a far greater chance of eliciting their interest and effort,
and positive outcomes. At the same time, students will encounter a more varied use of language forms as needed to fit the requirements of the assigned tasks in the course. The performance of tasks in pairs (or small groups) is a strong communicative framework for students that can be genuinely enjoyable and motivating.

Moreover, with TBLT, grade assessment for each student can be compiled on the basis of their participation and effort in course tasks, and consideration of performance outcomes leveraged on the linguistic capabilities of each individual student, rather than from the results of formal examinations whose nature is inherently detrimental for students at low levels of language proficiency. In fact, they recognize and respond positively to the justice of such a system. No student who enters a language class in the circumstances addressed in this paper should be, in effect, condemned from the start of the course to a poor or failing grade merely because s/he has low proficiency in the foreign language, even to the level of near illiteracy, due to whatever reasons from prior experience. At the same time, students understand well their personal accountability for their course grade with such a system and they act accordingly in the classroom.

Yet, Burrows (2008) proffers several legitimate barriers to effective implementation of TBLT which merit responses. It seems generally true that often there is an “apparent randomness” to TBLT. However, this is not a problem at all as the variety of lesson content, in fact, helps to sustain the interest of students, as long as that content remains appealing and relevant; and the teacher certainly should be able to weave a cohesive thread through these lessons. Indeed, presentation of consistently well-constructed, well-implemented task-based lessons with a variety of themes and content creates a certain momentum that draws from students a sense of positive expectation, if not motivation, for the lesson at hand rather than a dull, dismal dread of the same old, same old. It is also fair to note that “some students have difficulty completing activities that call for their own creative input.” Yet, it is precisely such creativity that students need to exercise. With appropriately devised, stimulating lesson materials and the teacher’s guidance, students should benefit from doing such assigned tasks. Teachers must have well-placed faith in their student’s capabilities.

It is surely the case in my experience with the low proficiency, academically underprepared students in my classes that TBLT “activities can often result in the prominent use of L1,” as Burrows (2008) further notes. There may be few other teachers who manage their classrooms with the discipline that I exercise. In
most of my other classes, English is strictly the only language used by the students and me, though I allow myself to say certain words in Japanese when students do not know some of the English words in use. However, in the classes of students considered in this paper, for many of them nearly any productive effort is an accomplishment. I feel that my task-based lessons maximize the output of English that these students are capable of generating given their limited academic and affective resources. In simple fact, most will not communicate in spoken English except in very highly structured formats because they can barely do so at all. However, while the members of pairs may mostly negotiate with each other in L1 (Japanese), the completion of the tasks themselves (often in written form) is always in English only. Moreover, in these classes, too, certainly I speak entirely in English except for telling the meaning of some isolated words in Japanese. These outcomes are far better than those of teacher-centered instruction itself in L1 (Japanese).

As the Willises (2009) observe, when criticisms are directed at innovative TBLT, they need to be applied as well to failing traditional practices.

Finally, Burrows (2008) also states that TBLT “can overemphasize the importance of just getting the job done.” Yet, again, for low proficiency, academically underprepared students “getting the job done” is itself a major accomplishment which then provides motivation to reach higher levels of performance that they themselves may not have known they had the capacity and the will to achieve. The interaction among pair or group members, indeed, sometimes may seem underwhelming, but the effort and skills required for such activities are precisely those that these students need to exercise and develop through the opportunities afforded by TBLT. This instructional approach must not be avoided simply because these students initially may not approach assigned tasks with the ardor of some with higher levels of proficiency or because their interpersonal social skills needed to undertake the tasks are initially underdeveloped (or atrophied, as noted earlier in this paper).

With TBLT, teachers provide opportunities in carefully structured lessons for students to relate their experiences and knowledge drawn from their personal lives and the society in which they live, and to formulate and express their thoughts, opinions, feelings, and imagination on topics within, or just a little beyond, their cognitive and linguistic domain. Employing such lesson content in well-suited activities facilitates, encourages, and motivates students’ meaningful use of the language and self-expression, and thus promotes language acquisition and proficiency. Moreover, such instruction has integrity and intrinsic
value in itself, even when the use of English by students surely will not carry beyond the classroom. For lesson content and tasks to fit students' interests, cognitive capacity, and ability to work in English, very careful, selective choices must be made. Any textbook is likely to be inappropriate, inadequate, and simply deadly. Thus, teachers have to rely on an established repertoire of individual instructional means and stretch themselves to devise and develop worthy new materials and procedures. Constructing their own creative and effective lesson materials and employing methodologies they determine most suitable not only enables teachers to control the instructional process but also, knowing precisely the thinking behind their own prepared lessons, to deliver them with the passion they feel for their work. Students readily pick up on that and are likely, then, to respond more genuinely and positively (Bress, 2009). For university students with low English proficiency and limited academic strengths, their engagement with the language through TBLT genuinely and importantly contributes to their sense of ownership of English. When they have performed an assigned task well, it is a teacher's delight to notice that they realize and appreciate what they have just done and the fact that they own it, and to know that, at least, they can carry out of the classroom.

5. Implementing TBLT: Class management

Classroom management refers to instructional planning and the entire instructional process. It takes in not only matters of discipline that may need to be addressed with students but also, much more essentially, the relationship between teacher and students and, indeed, everything that happens in the classroom.

Teachers must establish an appropriate academic atmosphere in the classroom. They must have clear, precise rules and procedures for the courses they teach which are communicated to students in a simple, easily understood way. These will refer to attendance and absences, class supplies and lesson materials, behavior and manners in the classroom, performance of class work, completion of homework assignments, and the criteria for evaluation and giving a grade for the course. It is imperative that students understand that the rules are real and the sanctions will be enacted as defined. At the same time, they must recognize the fairness of the rules and accept them for the good of the order. Students with low language proficiency and academic preparedness need a well-structured learning environment that they perceive to be humane, fair, safe, and within their capabilities to survive in. It is absolutely necessary in teaching such classes that
the students trust the teacher. The teacher’s moral authority is based on students’ perception of his honesty, fairness, genuine caring, and professionalism.

Lemov (2010, p. 213) makes distinctly clear that it is utterly false to think that warmth and strictness in the classroom are opposites. The teacher must be both; indeed, often at exactly the same time. “When you are clear, consistent, firm, and unrelenting and at the same time positive, enthusiastic, caring, and thoughtful, you start to send the message to students that having high expectations is part of caring for and respecting someone. This is a very powerful message.”

Sulich (2004, p. 33) states convincingly that “expectations and perceptions influence classroom interaction from the beginning.” She notes that research among younger students shows that they see the teacher in six dimensions. These views have direct relevance as well for the university students who are the subject of this paper and teachers would do well to keep them in mind. The dimensions are: keeps order vs. cannot keep order; teaches vs. does not teach; explains difficult concepts vs. does not explain well; interesting lessons vs. boring lessons; fair vs. unfair; friendly vs. unfriendly.

Issa (2009) points out the importance of incorporating organizational skills development into instructional routines, as students lacking such basic skills have significant difficulty learning. Establishing appropriate rules and procedures for classroom instruction teaches students to follow a basic organizational system that provides the scaffolding to support their learning. It also allows them to maintain such a system on their own and helps prepare them to cope with other university courses and the realities they will face when they enter the workforce. In TBLT there are organizational requirements implicit in the assigned tasks themselves for students to proceed with their successful completion. Thus, the nature of this instructional approach provides the kind of training in independent skills that many low proficiency students need. Class management, then, is seamlessly interwoven into the organization and actualization of the assigned tasks for students.

One often neglected aspect of good classroom management is the physical classroom environment itself. Teachers might learn something on this point from the application of criminology to pedagogy. The “broken windows theory” is based on the idea “that observing disorder can have a psychological effect on people” (Criminology, 2008). The name is taken from the observation that a few broken windows in an abandoned building usually leads to more shattered windows in that building and others, along with other
petty and serious crimes in the neighborhood. The theory has been tested experimentally by researchers who conclude that one example of disorder can encourage another. “The tendency for people to behave in a particular way can be strengthened or weakened depending on what they observe others to be doing.” The message for teachers is that when they do not seem to care that students enter the classroom late or chat while the teacher is speaking, or that the front board is not clean or that students’ seats are not ordered or leftover papers and canned drinks remain on desks, students then assume the teacher does not care either about the lesson he presents or whatever students do or do not do. Conversely, when the classroom itself is well-ordered, the teacher is there before the starting chimes, and stated rules and procedures are implemented, students assume that the lesson is important for the teacher and they more likely will assume the importance of the lesson for themselves as well and respond accordingly.

6. Motivational strategies

The aforementioned elements of task-based language teaching and the instructional approaches to its effective implementation, including the many facets of classroom management and aspects of the teacher’s personal engagement, correspond well with the motivational strategies given by Dornyei (2001) which promote classroom language learning. Those strategies refer to “those motivational influences that are consciously exerted to achieve some systematic and enduring positive effect” (p. 28). They include (pp. 137-144) four categories: creating the basic motivational conditions, generating initial motivation, maintaining and protecting motivation, and encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation. Among the 35 presented by Dornyei, specifically, are:

- take the students’ learning very seriously
- create a pleasant and supportive atmosphere in the classroom
- promote the development of group cohesiveness
- increase the students’ expectancy of success in particular tasks and in learning in general
- make the curriculum and the teaching materials relevant to the students
- make learning stimulating and enjoyable for the learners by enlisting them as active task participants
- provide learners with regular experiences of success
- build your learners’ confidence by providing regular encouragement
increase student motivation by promoting cooperation among the learners

use grades in a motivating manner, reducing as much as possible their demotivating impact

The following comments, translated from the Japanese, are from students in my university general English classes who fit the descriptions presented in this paper. The remarks, which many students took the time and effort to write voluntarily after responding to a set of questions by checking a rating from 5 (tops) to 1, are representative of what the students in these classes as a whole indicated on the anonymous course evaluation form constructed by a faculty committee and used by all teachers in their classes at the end of each term. The feedback reflects the success achieved from my classroom management, lesson materials, mode of instruction, personal manner with students, and motivational strategies.

“The lesson environment is good.”

“It is good that the classroom environment is serious.”

“The class rules are strict, but the purpose is clear, and the result is a class environment in which it is easy to take lessons.”

“That the teacher always checks attendance and supplies is a good tension.”

“There is no private chatting in the class, so I can concentrate.”

“The way of teaching is easy for me to understand.”

“The lessons are well-planned, good and enjoyable, with different lesson materials every week.”

“The teacher is interesting and his enthusiasm is good.”

“It is good that I have to think in this class.”

“The lesson content is clear and students know exactly what to do in every lesson.”

“The teacher encourages me and now I like English.”

7. TBLT in the classroom

In his essay “Language and The Human Spirit”, Jim Cummins (2003) observes that “there is an inseparable linkage between the conceptions of language and human identity that we infuse in our classroom instruction.” In the context of the instructional choices we make, he notes that we must examine “the extent to which the classroom interactions we orchestrate build on and affirm the cultural, linguistic, intellectual and personal identities that students bring to our classrooms.” In the setting of university classes
with students having low levels of English language proficiency along with weak academic preparedness and orientation, task-based language teaching is an appropriate means to address this humanistic educational endeavor as well as to provide a language learning experience for the students in which they may acquire, perhaps for the first time, a genuine sense of accomplishment in the use of the language and in an interactive, participatory classroom environment.

The English language classroom is as authentic an environment, as much a part of the real world, as any other venue in society. There is nothing artificial or contrived in the human relations that are the essence of the culture of the classroom, and the communication that takes place in the context of the classroom, with its own legitimate norms and conventions (Cullen, 1998), is as real as any other outside its walls. Indeed, the relations between teacher and students and among students themselves are often more intimate and genuine than those many people experience outside the classroom. The content of task-based language teaching centers on students’ own lives and the instructional process involves students closely with one another. As Azar (2007) remarks about communicative language practice, it takes account of the reality that students are in a classroom trying to learn English and it “means that real people are communicating in real time about real things in a real place for a real purpose.”

Task-based language lessons require impeccable preparation in order to be appropriate for the students and delivered successfully with positive outcomes. Indeed, three inescapably fundamental factors required for good teaching in any circumstances, and particularly those addressed in this paper, are: skills, skills, skills.

**Teaching English in English**

One critical skill is the teachers’ effective use of English in the classroom (Porcaro, 2009). Teaching English in English is a highly developed skill that is acquired from training, practice, and experience. It does not manifest itself simply because a teacher may be a native speaker or have a high level of English language fluency. Merely speaking English in the classroom does not equate with the adept use of English to teach the language with successful results. Especially with low proficiency students, teachers need to speak with exceptional clarity, appropriate volume, simple and limited vocabulary and syntax, and in a careful linear manner, without diversions or interruptions in their delivery. They must speak in carefully
measured phrases, followed by pauses, with a suitable pace and rhythm, and a judicious amount of
repetition. Points need to be expressed concisely and precisely. The content must be cognitively simple in
order to fit students’ level of comprehension. Finally, teachers must have tolerance that still they will not be
understood fully by all students, though everyone should be able to follow at least the main points of the
presentation and the instructions for the assigned task. I speak in class nearly entirely in English and my
students function well in this environment. Reliance on Japanese is a pretext that reveals to all the
deficiencies of the teacher.

**Storytelling**

Storytelling is one of the first and regular components of the syllabus for my English course for first-
year students in the university setting described in this paper. This type of activity, along with all forms of
listening in the class, exposes students to lots of comprehensible input, which aspect of TBLT has its
theoretical foundation in the work of Krashen (1981). Hoey, whose theory of “lexical priming” was referred
to earlier in this paper, states that storytelling is one of the most effective ways to teach collocations as
learners, in this way, “are exposed to natural language in a natural context” (Spyropoulou, 2009).

I employ a repertoire of very carefully selected and edited short stories, each about 400 - 500 words in
length, that are suitable for the students in these classes in terms of sparking their interest and a positive
response, and their handling both the language and content along with the associated assigned tasks. The
stories are dramatic episodes that readily impress students’ imagination. They include easily recognizable
characters, a combination of narrative and dialog text, and a pivotal dramatic element that students can
appreciate. The stories are used effectively for listening, reading, recitation, and writing tasks.

I use one simple story in the first class meeting of the school year and by the end of the 90-minute period
several groups of three students, in turn, stand in front of the class and give reading recitations of the story
in three parts. One of the particular purposes of doing this in the initial class meeting is to establish my
moral authority and to earn the trust of the students. They do as I direct them to do and in so doing they
witness and experience that, in fact, they can do what I ask them to do, I will help them as necessary to
succeed in the assigned tasks, and they will not be frustrated, embarrassed, or demoralized in the English
classroom. (As students practice oral reading of the story in pairs before I select those to recite in the front
of the room, I very carefully note those who have limited capacity to read in English and do not call them to
the front of the room in this first class meeting.) This lesson also establishes students’ confidence in
themselves and the respect they will show for one another in the classroom.

I use four or five stories over the length of the two-semester course. The tasks for some stories
personalize the themes, as in the O. Henry classic, “The Gift of the Magi”, students write on a worksheet
information points about a treasured possession of their own and special gifts they have given and received.
For the Lafcadio Hearn story of “Mujina”, they write a brief sketch about a frightening experience they
have had. These writing tasks are introduced with an active listening task in which students hear some of
my own stories about these themes while answering comprehension questions on a worksheet I have
prepared and given to them. Creative writing is another task that I assign for some stories. Students working
in pairs construct their own dialogs for characters in the story or write individually their own imagined
ending for a given story. Note that there are ample opportunities to focus on English language forms within
the texts of these stories themselves, in the items given on the worksheets and students’ responses, and in
follow-up writing tasks of the kind that have been suggested.

**Writing tasks**

For many of the assigned tasks throughout the course, students write, sometimes individually and
sometimes as pairs completing a jointly constructed piece of work. This mode of production is not only a
necessity, given that most of the students have an extremely limited capacity for oral communication in
English and simply will not engage in it freely, but also it has several benefits. The writing tasks focus
students’ attention on language usage, both lexical forms and to some extent grammatical forms. Students,
in fact, use dictionaries, usually electronic, much more than needed or desired for these tasks, but this is a
trade-off which allows them to move on with the task independently and with a sense of confidence and
satisfaction with the language they are using. Furthermore, when I give feedback on their work, usually in
the following lesson, after having collected the worksheets and polished at least some of their work, I read,
for example, some of their frightening experience stories or their story character dialogs and story endings
while they listen and complete a comprehension worksheet. I believe that doing this gives students a
genuine sense of the worth and meaning of their effort and expression. Moreover, their own written work provides further instructional material for listening and reading tasks.

**Other listening tasks**

Other explicit listening tasks employed in the course include short dictations on topical subjects, related to the season of the year at hand, for example, and lectures on subjects such as Japan’s aging society and an introduction to Africa. The lectures in particular illustrate well the extent to which sophisticated topics can be included in the instructional content of an English language course for low-proficiency learners with limited academic attributes. My 30-minute talk on Japan’s aging society highlights relevant data which are shown to students in colorful graphic formats. The topical vocabulary actually is quite limited and visible numerical data are readily understood through the medium of any language. My two-hour lecture on Africa – delivered over two class meetings – is astonishingly successful. (African Studies was my first area of advanced academic work and, a long time ago, I lived and taught in Uganda for several years.) All students listen with rapt attention and interest, and some take notes even though I make no mention at all that they could do so. I use a variety of maps, posters, pictures, and other graphic materials in my presentation. The lectures, in fact, are organized around the list of “images of Africa” that students have written on a worksheet in a previous lesson. This procedure of basing some lesson content on material generated by the students themselves validates for students the integrity of their work and provides a sense of self-esteem they may not have experienced much in their past school life.

One other highly successful lecture lesson involves my brief presentation of pro and con sides of ten topical social issues facing Japan. They include, for example, whether or not the use of lay judges in Japan’s court system is a good procedure, whether or not married couples should be allowed to retain separate surnames, and whether or not more “baby hatches” for unwanted babies should be set up in hospitals. After my comments of about five minutes on each of the topics, one by one, students “vote” by checking a box next to a statement of support or rejection of each issue. After collecting the papers from the three classes that I teach, I tally the results and present them to the classes the following week. Students’ interest in the presentation of the topics is very clear from everyone’s sustained attention for more than one hour, even though they certainly do not fully comprehend each and every point I make on the topics, and
their interest in the results of the poll of all the classes is palpably high. Once again it is noteworthy that while the students are not capable of discussing in English these issues, they can engage with them in an active listening and participatory way. Such a lesson as well lends further academic integrity to the course itself as a part of the university curriculum.

**Listing**

Listing, in fact, is one of the simplest tasks that can be assigned with topics that immediately relate to students, such as common activities in their lives and likes and dislikes of various sorts. A degree of critical thinking applies with listings of good points and bad points concerning particular subjects. For example, as part of my lesson on Japan’s aging society, students in pairs list advantages and disadvantages of living together for each of the generation members in a three-generation family. It is a modest exercise in reasoning and sorting ideas, and points can be expressed in English briefly with vocabulary within the students’ domain or available from ready reference to a dictionary. After collecting the students’ worksheets, assembling their collective points, and polishing the English, in the next lesson I distribute an impressive looking compilation of their work in a well-laid out paper which is used to review the content, vocabulary, and language forms contained therein. This kind of post-task activity provides students a non-threatening opportunity to focus on form as they may compare their original output with a polished version and notice the elements of grammar employed to give greater clarity and precision to the meaning of lexical items in their content points (Cullen, 2008).

**Things Japanese**

Another important recurring theme in my syllabus is “things Japanese”. With well-prepared, very colorful and appealing lesson papers, students are instructed to explain, describe, and tell basic information about Japanese events, activities, foods, games, artifacts, and other items that are representative of certain periods of the year in Japan, for example, summertime and the end of the year and the New Year. As with many other assigned tasks, students work in pairs, negotiate their responses to the given items, and jointly write on the worksheets. Of course, as always, I initially present models of the task to be completed and monitor, guide, and support the students as they proceed with their work. An especially significant aspect of
Structured speaking tasks

Lastly, as for speaking tasks for classes of university students with low English language proficiency and a weak academic orientation, certainly it is possible to include them in the course work, but necessarily in highly structured formats. I have found success with grids of questions (usually 15) on a wide variety of topics from simple conversational questions, such as “What will you do after school today?” and “What is your part-time job?” to easily understood and simply answerable broader questions such as “Do you think the voting age in Japan should be lowered to 18?” and “What do you think was the biggest news story in [the past year]?” (answered from a given choice of five newspaper headlines). Written on the grid paper are the full answer formats, such as “After school today I will …” and “I think the voting age in Japan [should] [should not] be lowered to 18.” After a round of teacher-directed practice of each question on the grid, students interact with other members of the class by asking one question and responding to one question to different classmates. Within this highly structured format students are able to speak totally in English. Moreover, the questions and the answer formats are embedded with grammatical forms and thus give students exposure and practice with them in listening to the teacher and classmates, in the oral information exchange with classmates, and in completing the answers of those other students in writing on their worksheets. Later, follow-up activities and tasks are employed with a number of the topics. My impression is that that this highly successful instructional device is one of the students’ favored lessons.

8. Conclusion

In the early years of the previous decade, Finland emerged consistently at the top of the tables of international test results for elementary and secondary students in mathematics, science and reading, and its education system has earned a respected reputation for high quality. Some time ago, a visiting reporter at a comprehensive school in Helsinki asked the principal the reasons for her country’s educational
achievements. She stated there were three reasons: “Teachers, teachers, and teachers” (Kaiser, 2005). Indeed, teachers need to understand and accept the responsibility and the challenge that it is we who make all the difference in the quality of education for our students. Moreover, the results of our work should be assessed more by the accomplishments of the least capable of our students than by the success of students with stronger backgrounds, preparation, and motivation. Task-based language teaching is an effective means of instruction for the increasing number of students who enter Japanese universities with low English language proficiency along with a weak academic orientation for studies at this level. As Skehan (2002) notes, however, task-based language teaching, as compared to a teacher-centered, lockstep approach that follows the unit-by-unit prescription of a "one size fits all" coursebook, "requires a skillful, responsive, knowledgeable teacher". Indeed, with this instructional approach, teachers need to establish a compelling mission, prepare much of their own materials, employ effective methodologies and management strategies, and maintain their own strong motivation. Yet, the exercise of these skills and efforts by teachers can ensure that students experience notable success in the English language classroom. University teachers of other subjects, too, may draw from the points presented in this paper some value for their instruction as well.

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