

Task-based language teaching in Japan: Problems and possibilities

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Theoretical perspectives

What is a task?

A classroom activity that:

1. requires learners to use the language as a tool to communicate.
2. has a clearly defined outcome which involves some kind of 'gap'.
3. requires the participants to use their own linguistic resources to complete the task.

Why tasks?

Implicit knowledge

- Knowledge 'how' (i.e. available for communicating)
- Intuitive
- Automatic processing
- Necessary for fluent use of language
- Non-verbalizable

Knowledge that you can use to communicate fluently

Explicit knowledge

- Knowledge 'what' (i.e. knowledge of language rules)
- Conscious knowledge
- Controlled processing
- Used for monitoring accuracy
- Verbalizable

Knowledge you can use to explain language rules

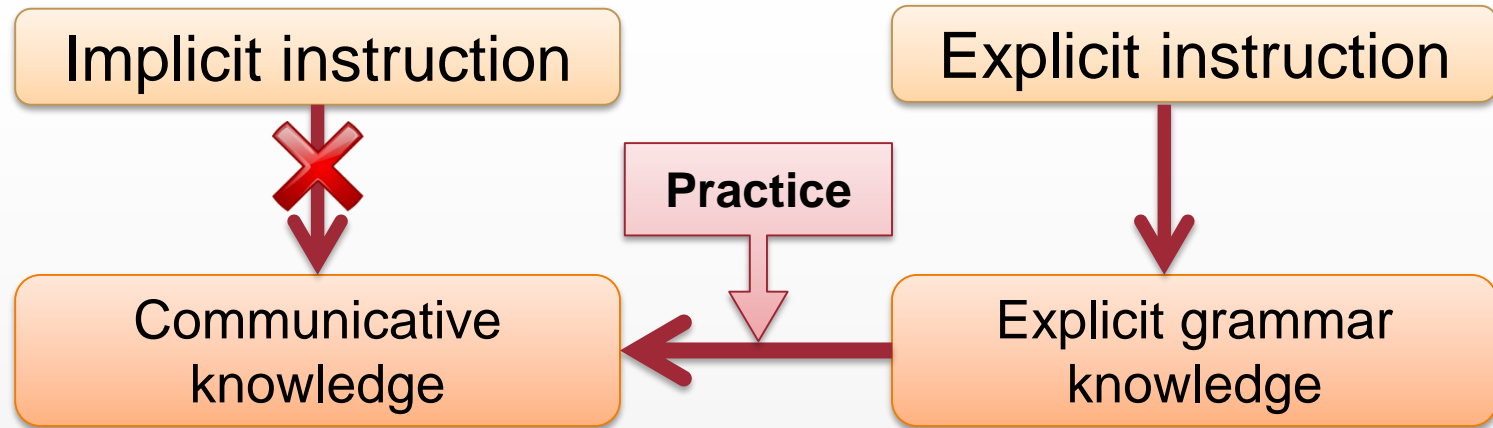
Why tasks?

Implicit instruction	Explicit instruction
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• language is treated as a tool for communication• presents target forms in context• no rule explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Language is treated as an object for study• presents target forms in isolation• use of rule explanation



Implicit knowledge	Explicit knowledge
Knowledge of the language for communication	Knowledge of the rules for passing an exam

Skill-acquisition theory

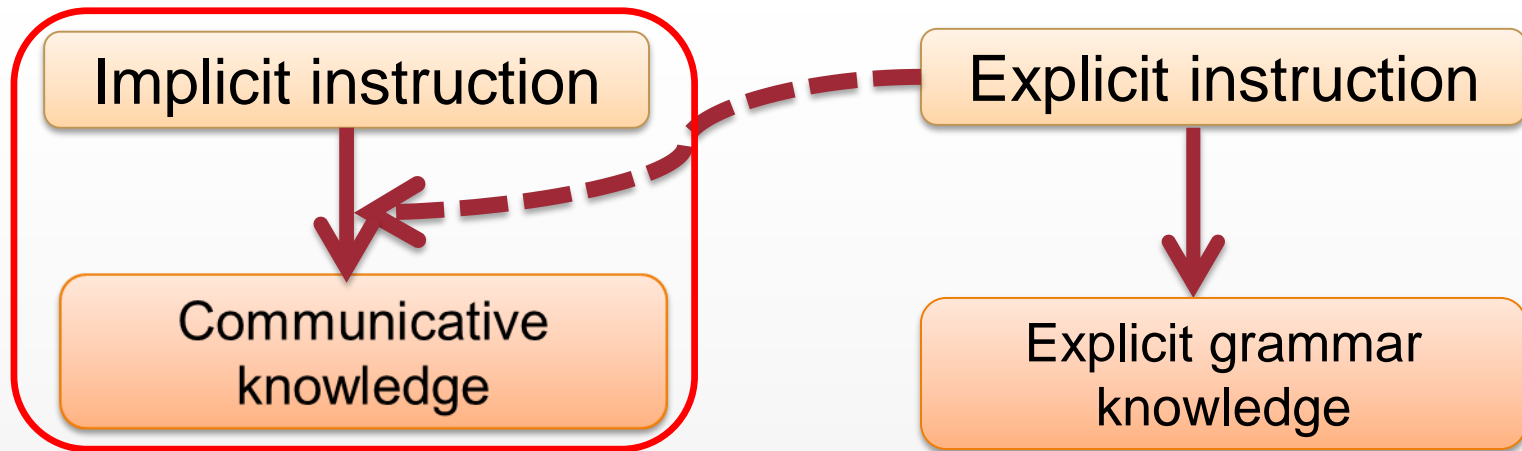


“Learning involves a progression from an initial declarative knowledge (explicit knowledge) stage involving controlled processing, to a final procedural stage (implicit knowledge) where knowledge is automatic. Skills are learnt as a result of ‘practice’.

Pedagogical approach

Present-Practice-Produce(tasks)

Interactionist perspectives



- Negotiation for meaning
- Focus-on-form
- Pushed output
- Noticing, noticing-the-gap
- Incidental acquisition

Pedagogical approach

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

How are they different?

Task-based language teaching (TBLT)



Present-Practice-Produce (PPP)

Key features

	Task-supported (PPP)	Task-based (TBLT)
Operationalization	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1.Present2.Practice3.Produce(Task)	Tasks <ul style="list-style-type: none">• with corrective feedback• followed by present-practice (Willis, 1996)
Language is treated as:	an object of learning	a tool to communicate
Learner' primary focus	on a linguistic form	on meaning
Syllabus	Linguistic syllabus	Task-based syllabus

Dynamic System Theory/ Usage-based Linguistics

Language is a complex adaptive system: Linguistic systems emerge gradually, driven by the exemplars people are exposed to in social interaction.

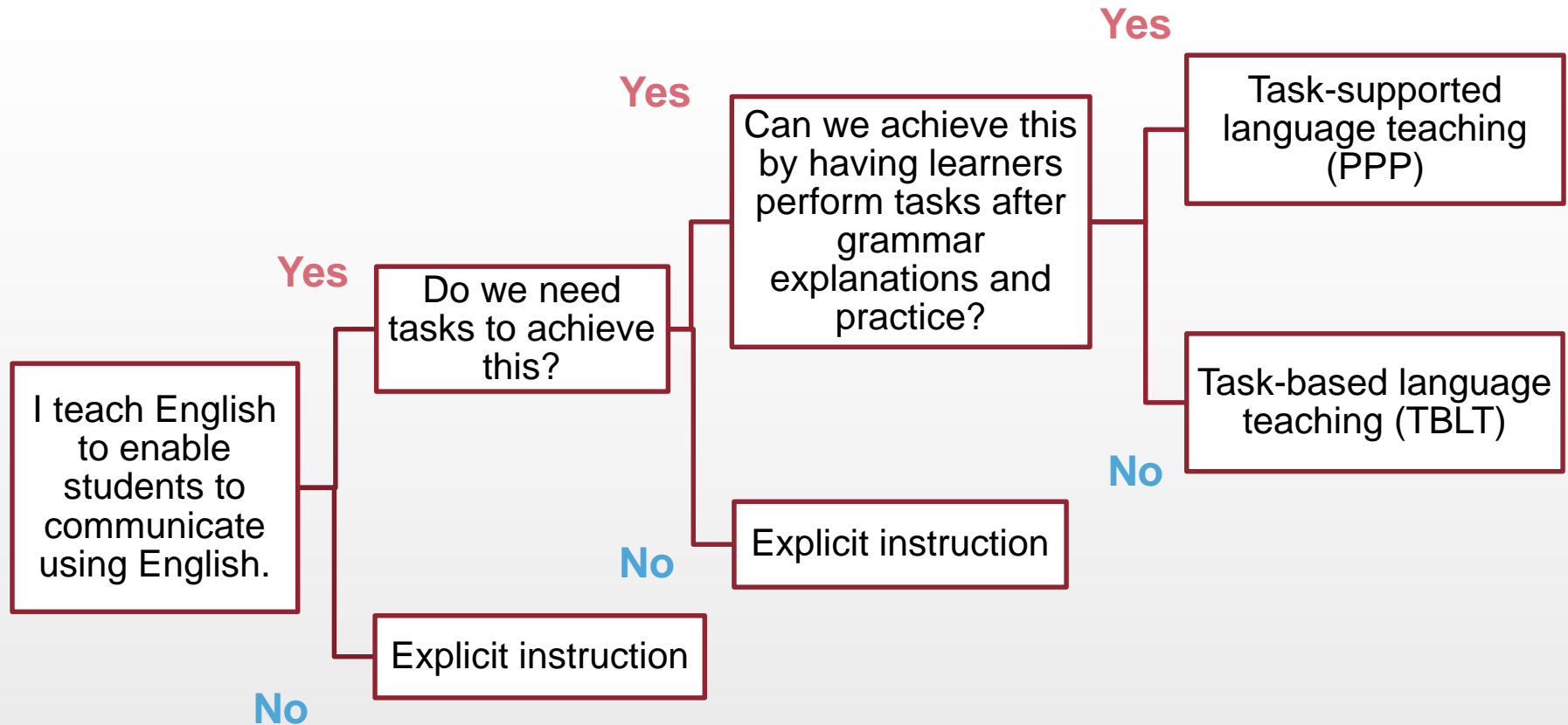
- Language development depends on the previous level (Zone of Proximal Development by Sociocultural theory)
- Language knowledge consists of complex system with a number of sub-systems. A change in one sub-system can change the others. – Continuous interaction between different sub-systems

Dynamic System Theory/ Usage-based Linguistics

- Language form has an abstract meaning of transfer (Steinkrauss, 2009) – meaning creates a need for form, not the other way around.
- Language development is not linear. (not a set of rules and the language development is assumed to be linear).
- Language learning involves bottom-up – item-based knowledge ‘self-organizes’ and patterns emerge (Teachers cannot ‘teach’ the transition, rather, only create conditions and interactions where it can emerge).
- Language learning involves association, categorization and abstraction (Langacker, 2000). Item-based construction → abstract construction.

Implementing tasks in teaching

Which approach is suitable for your teaching?



Issues in implementing tasks

- ? Is it possible to introduce tasks to teach the current syllabus?
- ? How can we make tasks suitable for Japanese students?
- ? How can we measure the students' improvement?
- ? What is the teacher's role in tasks?

“Is it possible to introduce tasks to teach the current syllabus?”

Task-supported

Yes - requires an extensive ‘production’ stage involving a task after the ‘presentation’ and ‘practice’ stages



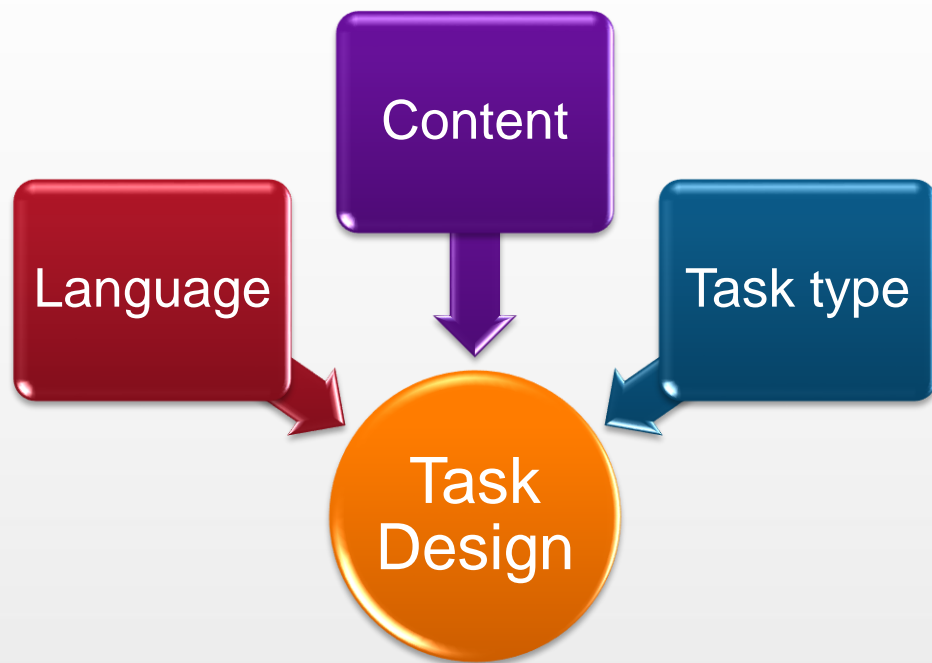
Task-based

No - but you can have parallel regular and task-based lessons.

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu
English (Regular)			English (Regular)
		English (TBLT)	

“How can we make tasks suitable for Japanese students?”

Difficulty of the task




Easy	Difficult
Input-based	Output-based
Information gap	Opinion gap
One-way	Two-way
Teacher-class participatory structure	Student-student participatory structure
+ pre-task planning	- pre-task planning

An example

1. Work in groups (4 students in 1 group). The teacher gives an instruction and the goal of the task (to choose one of the four countries that they donate money raised at a school event).
2. Each of the four students is given a sheet with information about a different country.
3. The students exchange information about their countries (without showing their sheets). (**output-based; one-way information-gap**).
4. The students discuss and decide which country should receive the raised money (**output-based; two-way opinion-gap**).
5. One of the group members presents and explains the group decision to the class (**output-based (for the presenter) or input-based (for the audience); one-way information-gap**).
6. All the students vote for the most convincing group (**task outcome**).


An example

1. Work in groups (4 students) receive instruction and the goal is to identify countries that they don't know.
2. Each of the four students identifies a different country.
-  3. The students exchange information (without showing their sheets).

<i>Name of the country</i>	
<i>Problems</i>	
<i>How many people are suffering</i>	
<i>What help do they need?</i>	
<i>How much would it cost?</i>	

- Pre3. Consulting the dictionary, students individually fill in a given task sheet with a table to understand the information (**pre-task planning**).
3. Consulting the task sheets the students share the information with the other students (**input-based one-way information-gap**).

An example

-  4. The students discuss and decide which country should receive the raised money (**output-based; two-way opinion-gap**).

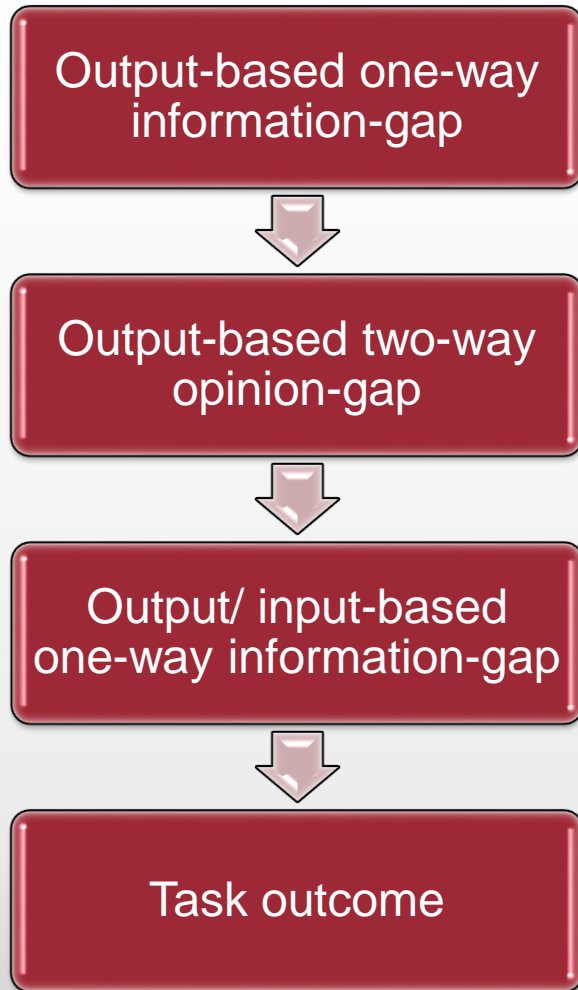
- 4. The students discuss and decide which country should receive the raised money (**discuss using Japanese**).

An example

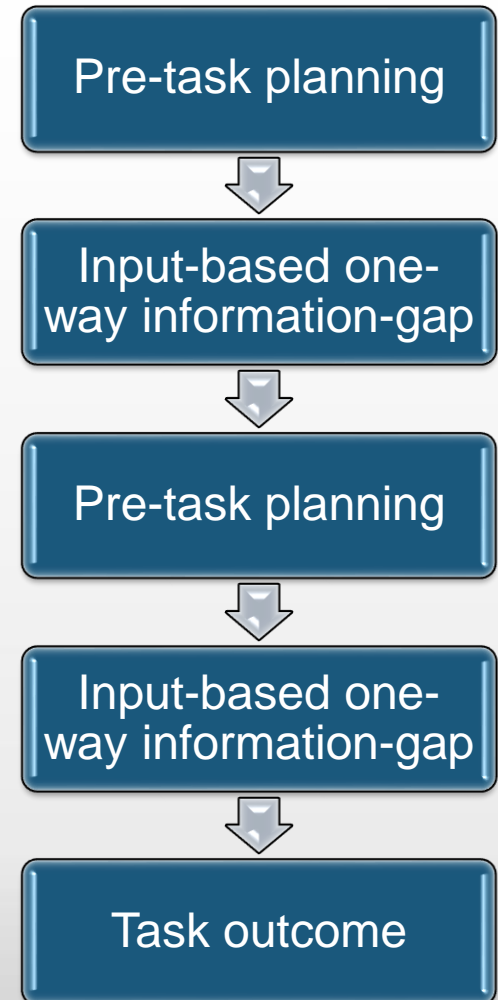


5. One of the group members presents and explains the group decision to the class (**output-based (for the presenter) or input-based (for the audience); one-way information-gap**).
- Pre5. The students prepare a text to explain their decision (**pre-task planning**) and get ready to present to the rest of the class.
5. One of the group member presents to the class (**input-based one-way information-gap**).
6. All the students vote for the most convincing group (**task outcome**).

Differences in task difficulty



Difficult	Easy
Output-based	Input-based
Opinion gap	Information gap
Two-ways	One-way
Student-student participatory structure	Teacher-class participatory structure
- pre-task planning	+ pre-task planning



Designing Focused Tasks

How to design focused tasks (Tanaka & Tanaka, 2014)*

1. list the functions of the target structure (how the structure can be used in a real life situation)
2. decide which cognitive process the task should involve (see Willis & Willis 2007)
3. decide the task outcome
4. examine whether the task matches the students' cognitive levels and their interests
5. predict possible errors the students would make

*Tanaka, T & Tanaka, T (2014). *Designing of English Classrooms: Grammar Teaching*. Tokyo:Taishukan.

Tips for group work

Establish positive interdependence (Sato, 2014)*

- allocate roles to each group member
- remove within-group competitions and create between-group competitions

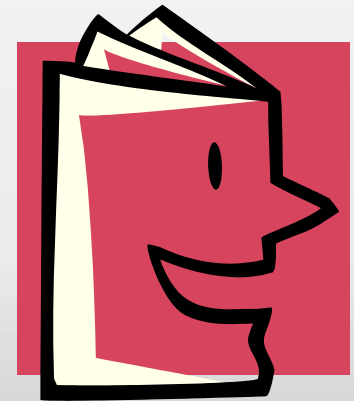
*Sato, M. (2014). 限られた授業時間内にスピーキング能力を伸ばすには, *The English Teachers' Magazine*, July 2014.

“How can we measure the students’ improvement?”

Tasks	Explicit instruction
Ability to use English as a tool to achieve a communicative purpose	Ability to comprehend and produce English correctly in a controlled way



Assessment should test this ability.



An Example

A typical test

Read Ken's story and answer to the questions.

I have four family members, father, mother, and a younger brother. We live in a small apartment. It has two rooms and one dining room with a small kitchen. My family is now looking for a bigger apartment. My father wants to have his own room to work at home. My mother wants her room to practice the violin. She also wants to have a bigger dining room with a fire place. My brother and I can share a room but we want a big room. We can practice soccer in the room!

1. How many rooms does the family apartment have?
2. What does the mother want to do in her room?
3. Why does Ken want a big room for himself and his brother?

Testing the learners' accurate comprehension of the text

Make a test task-like

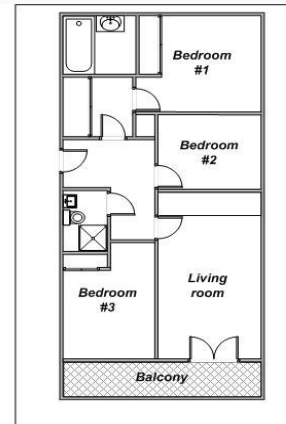
(with the same story)

Meaning-focused.

1. You are a real estate agent. Choose the best apartment for Ken's family.



b)



Using pictures requires the students to relate the linguistic information to non-linguistic (conceptual) information.

2. Now, decide which room should be the children's room and write the reason in English.

The goal is to solve the problem, not just to comprehend the text.

Problem-solving task (i.e. tasks that demands intellectual activity involving solving a puzzles or applying logic) (Willis & Willis, 2007)

Role of teachers

- ❖ Knowledge provider → Facilitator ?
- ❖ Input provider: Teachers serve language models for the learner
- ❖ Teachers need to learn how to become effective input providers

The teacher and the students are both L2 learners at different points on the long journey of L2 learning!

Conditions for successful innovation in teaching

Ely's (1990)

1. Dissatisfaction with the status quo
2. Sufficient knowledge and skills
3. Resources are available
4. Time is available
5. Rewards or incentives exist for participants
6. Participation is expected and encouraged
7. Commitment
8. Leadership is evident

Ortega (2012)

An innovation can start from “a small individual success” when a teacher is willing to try something new.



