

Doing Task Based Teaching in Junior High Schools

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1. Prologue

For the past few years I have been interested in the practice of task-based teaching (hereafter TBT) in Japanese junior high school contexts. The appeal of TBT is that it encourages learners to use language as a means of accomplishing an objective. When TBL works like it should learners are autonomously listening, speaking and interacting in the target language.

Last year I wrote a paper (Hall, 2007a) about a task-based class I conducted for an open lesson (*kenkyuu jugyou*) in Mizusawa Higashi Junior High School. The results were mixed as many students struggled to carry out the tasks. Referencing Richard's (1987) dimensions for effective instruction, I argued that questionable decisions made with grouping, structuring, the response mode, and level of complexity of the task doomed the lesson. Using the lessons I learned from this experience, this year I again endeavored to teach a task based language lesson at Mizusawa Junior High School (hereafter Mizusawa JHS). The results were much better as students were able to successfully carry out the tasks.

This paper is meant to serve as a reference for practitioners interested in trying TBT in their respective contexts, and it has the following objectives: (a) define and give a rationale for TBT, (b) show what TBT at junior high schools looks like, (c) reveal strategies for facilitating TBT in junior high schools.

2. What is a task?

In this paper, a task will be defined as an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the involvement of real-world language processes. This definition has been adapted from Van den Branden (2006, p.4) and Ellis (2003, p.10). An example of a task could be putting the lines of a scrambled dialogue into the correct order with a partner. The real-world language processes would be negotiating the order of the lines or explaining the reason for putting a certain line before another. Real world language processes encompass more than speaking the

language. For example, listening to a long announcement for specific information is another example of a real world language process.

Tasks have a pre-task, task, and post task phase, but the only obligatory phase is task. Both the pre-task and post-task phase, however, “serve a crucial role in ensuring that the task performance is maximally effective for language development” (Ellis, 2003, p.243). Below, I will explain each phase of a task-based language lesson. Each phase contains several options concerning activities and class management which teachers can choose from. The descriptions are derived from Ellis (2003).

2.1 Pre-task

The purpose of the pre-task phase is to prepare students for the task. To help students prepare, teachers can choose from the following:

1. Introduce the activity and establish the outcome, or what it is hoped that the students will accomplish.
2. Give students time to plan/prepare for the task.
3. Have students do a similar task to prepare.
4. Introduce students to language that can help them complete the task.

2.2 Task

During this phase, students partake in the task. Teachers have the following options:

- 1a. Students perform the task under time pressure
- 1b. Students perform the task under no time pressure.
- 2a. Students work in groups.
- 2b. Students work in pairs.
- 2c. Students work individually.

2.3 Post-Task

The purpose of the post-task phase is to do an activity to build off or consolidate what was learned in the task phase. In this phase, teachers have the following options:

1. Learners report to the class or to each other how they performed the task/ what they discovered/decided.

2. Consciousness raising (a focus on form): Grammar exercises or practice.
3. Learners repeat the task.

3. The task based language lesson (Scheduled time: 50 minutes)

The lesson was conducted during an open-class conference which was held as part of the cooperation agreement between Iwate University and Oshu City. The conference consisted of two English classes. Both classes were to use the same page of the same textbook, but the teachers and students for each class would be different. The purpose of the conference was to compare the two teachers' teaching styles. I had been requested to teach the first class.

The lessons were conducted on October 1, 2007. My lesson consisted of 20 1st year students who were between 12 and 13 years of age. That day was the first time I had met the students. In addition, there were 30 teachers from other schools viewing the class, and the atmosphere was tense. I was nervous to teach a class in front of strangers to students I had never met before, and the students were nervous to take a class in front of strangers from a teacher they had never met before.

The Oshu Board of Education had requested that the classes use page 55 of the Year 1 New Horizon textbook, *Listening Plus 2*. This page consisted of a listening exercise where students listened for the nationality, age, residence and other information of 2 fictitious foreigners living in Japan. When planning for the class, I had decided to cover the same target words and structures using my own materials. The reasoning behind this decision was that I thought that students would be more interested learning about real non-Japanese (hereafter NJ) living in Morioka rather than fictitious ones.

The class consisted of two tasks, a listening task, task 1, and a speaking task, task 2. The objectives of the tasks were as follows:

Task 1: Listen to an easy speech and understand the important points without getting stuck on unknown words.

Task 2: Give a simple speech without memorizing it but rather by using key words to recall the content..

3.1 Rationale for the tasks

This class was planned with the intention of satisfying Willis's (1996) three essential conditions for language learning. These conditions are: exposure, use of language, and motivation. Exposure refers to learners receiving a substantial amount of rich and comprehensible input of authentic spoken and written language. Lightbown and Spada (2006, p.32) write that a commonality between language learners of all ages and contexts is that they have exposure to modified or adapted input.

Use of language refers to giving students the opportunity to use language that they already know. Willis (1996) writes that "if learners know that in class they will be expected to make real use of the target language themselves, this leads them to pay attention to what they hear and read, and to process the input more analytically, noticing useful features of language" (p.13). In other words, it can be concluded that noticing new features in the input plays an important role in learning a second language (see Doughty, 2003, p.289). Thus, the rationale behind a listening task followed by a speaking task was to encourage students to use the input to which they were exposed for their output.

The last essential condition for language learning is motivation. If students do not have the will to (a) listen to and learn from what they hear and (b) make the necessary effort to use the language then they will make little progress in learning the second language. As will be seen later, the introduction of the lesson was designed to increase students' motivation to listen and learn from the input and use their new knowledge in their output.

In the remainder of section 3, I will describe the TBT I conducted at Mizusawa JHS in detail. The lesson plan in its entirety can be seen in Appendix 1. Additionally, the video used for the class can be viewed on my blog (see Hall, 2007b).

3.2 Introduction (Scheduled time: 5 minutes)

The introduction of the class was designed to raise the students' level of motivation to complete the tasks. At the beginning of the class, I gave a brief 5-minute presentation to explain the utility and purpose of the task. Ellis (2003, p.244) writes that explaining the purpose and utility of a task could be

“especially important for learners from traditional ‘studial’ [sic] classrooms: they may need to be convinced of the values of a more ‘experiential’ approach”. In the previous year’s class, succumbing to my nervousness and my desire to get the class underway, I had neglected to adequately explain the purpose and utility of the task. This year, I wanted to ensure that students knew why we would be doing the task and hoped that it would increase their motivation. The English translation of the speech is below and the Japanese version can be seen in Appendix 1.

Everyone in this room at one point or another will have the opportunity to meet an NJ. Among the NJ that you will meet, some will speak Japanese and English, others will speak Japanese and another foreign language, and some might only speak English. So, when you meet an NJ it might not be necessary for you to speak English. Nevertheless, English is the world’s most spoken second language. English is not just a means for you to talk to the British, Australians, Americans or New Zealanders; it is a useful means for you to talk with people throughout the world. Therefore, I think that all of you someday will be in a situation where you will have to use English with an NJ. For example, if you go abroad or welcome an international group to Japan, you will most likely have to listen to a speech or give a speech in English. Our goal for today’s class is to listen to a speech in English and then say a speech in English without memorizing it. First, we will listen to a speech. The speaker speaks English as a second language. Next, you will all have the chance to give a speech. I hope that today’s practice will be useful to you someday.

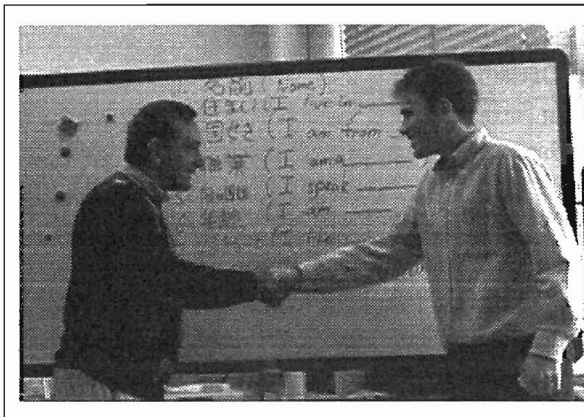
3.3 Task 1 (Scheduled time: 20 minutes)

In the first task, students were to watch the video of a researcher at Iwate University, Mr. Jan Oravec, talking about (a) where he is from, (b) his occupation, (c) the languages he speaks, and (d) his likes. The items that students were asked to listen for were similar to the items they would have answered in the textbook. Before the video, I had instructed Mr. Oravec of the type of grammar he should use so that students would be able to understand

him.

In the video there was a lot of interaction between me and Mr. Oravec as I reacted to what he said by repeating the important points or by asking him following up questions. My presence in the video was designed to help students with their comprehension of Mr. Oravec's talk.

Task 1: Video of Mr. Oravec with the author



For the listening task, I attempted to choose someone with an interesting background: Mr. Oravec came from a country that students did not know well, Slovakia, spoke 5 languages, and was a chemist, a

profession that contradicts the stereotype of NJ as English teachers.

3.31 Pre-task

In the pre-task, students were shown a picture of Mr. Oravec and told that they would be listening to a speech by him. They were then asked if they could guess where Mr. Oravec was from. Lastly, students were told that Mr. Oravec would be saying where he was from, his occupation, the languages he speaks and his likes. Students were encouraged to listen for the specific information and not to worry if there were parts of the speech they did not understand.

The option chosen for the pre-task was 1, introducing the activity and establishing the outcome. Although the interview had many words that students did not know such as chemist, given the time constraints, option 4, or pre-teaching the words necessary to complete the task, was not possible. To compensate for this, the listening worksheet (see Appendix 2) had Japanese translations for unknown words that were crucial to completing the task successfully.

3.32 Task

In the task students watched the interview on the classroom DVD player and selected Mr. Oravec's correct information on the listening worksheet. In this phase, students worked individually, thus, option 2c was chosen. The real-world language process for completing the task was listening for several pieces of specific information in a fairly long dialogue. Although students were not under any time pressure, the DVD of the interview was only played twice.

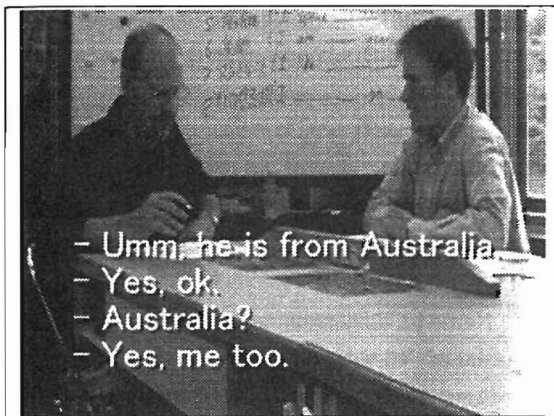
At the end of the class, students were asked to complete a self-evaluation sheet (see Appendix 4). Of the 13 students who submitted their self-evaluation sheet, 10 reported being correct on all 4 questions, 2 on being correct on 3 questions, and 1 being correct on 1 question.

3.33 Post-task

The post-task was a task itself. In this phase, option 1, or learners reporting to each other what they discovered/ decided when doing the task, was chosen. After watching the interview and completing the listening worksheet, students were asked to confirm the answers in pairs using only English. It was my belief that the students were capable of doing this but that they did not know how they could use their limited knowledge of the language to complete the task. Thus, before students started the post-task, a video of Michael Unher of the English Department and me doing a similar task was played.

The snapshot of the video below shows that subtitles were present to assure that students would be able to understand the language that was being said. The actors in the video used only grammar that students had learned up to that point in their English class. Students were told that they should watch the video carefully and write down any English they thought would be useful for confirming the answers with their partner.

Task 1: Demonstration of how to confirm answers



On the self evaluation sheet, one of the questions instructed students to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement that they were able to use English when confirming the answers with their partner. Of the 13 students who returned the

self-evaluation sheets, 4 wrote that they strongly agreed, 6 wrote that they agreed and 3 wrote that they disagreed.

3.4 Task 2 (Scheduled time: 20 minutes)

Although most students were able to complete Task 1, it had taken 26 minutes while only 20 minutes had been allotted for it. A little over 30 minutes had elapsed and to finish the class on time Task 2 would have to be modified. The objective of Task 2 was to say a simple speech in English using keywords to recall the content rather than memorizing every word. The real world language processes was giving a monologue using key words as a memory aid rather than a manuscript.

3.4.1 Pre-task – Step 1 – Write a speech

The options used for this stage were 1, introduce the activity and outcome and 2, give students time to prepare for the task. First, students were told that they were going to give a simple speech like Mr. Oravec had done earlier. Originally, the plan was for students to say their (a) name, (b) residence, (c) age, (d) likes, and (e) the day they do what they like. However, because Task 1 was longer than anticipated, the scope of the students' speech was reduced to (a), (b), (c), and (d). I asked them first to write their speech and

gave them 5 minutes to do so. Students wrote their speech using the Speaking Handout (see Appendix 3). Writing the speech consisted of filling in the blanks of a prewritten speech. The format of filling in the blanks was chosen over students writing the entire speech because it was thought that there would not be enough time to do the latter in a 50 minute period with 2 tasks.

3.42 Pre-Task – Step 2 – Practice the Speech

After students wrote their speech, the following word cards were posted on the blackboard.

Name (名前)
Residence (住まい)
Age (年齢)
likes (好きなこと)

Students were asked to prepare to give their speech to the whole class. They were then told that when they gave the speech they should not read it from their handout but rather look at the keywords on the blackboard while speaking. I added that often when we are asked to do public speaking we do not have time to memorize a speech. So, one thing we can do is use keywords to organize the speech in our heads and then give a speech thinking of the keywords as we speak. Students were given 5 minutes to practice the speech by themselves and were instructed to avoid looking at their handout as much as possible and focus only on the key words posted on the board. In order to confirm that they understood what they had been instructed to do, I gave a demonstration of a speech.

3.43 Task

For the task, the original plan was for students to give the speeches in pairs with a 5 minute time limit. After giving the speeches in pairs, I planned for individual students to present their speech to the whole class in the post-task. However, at this stage, there were only 10 minutes remaining in the class. In other words, there were only 10 minutes to complete Task 2 and write the self-evaluation forms. As a result, the task was changed so that

students would give speeches one at a time in front of the entire class. Once a speech finished we played the memory game. For example, after student A said her speech I would say to the class “student A likes ____” and they would give the answer. After student B spoke, I would say to the class “student A likes ____”, “student B likes _____”.

In the end, 8 students gave their speech in front of the class and they were able to do it without looking at their written speech. With 5 minutes remaining in the class, the task was ended so students could use the remaining time to write their self evaluation forms. There was no post-task.

4. Why was this class successful?

Although we were not able to do task 2 in its entirety, the students demonstrated that they were able to accomplish the objectives of each task: (a) listen to an extended dialogue understanding the main ideas and (b) give a speech in English using keywords. After the class the principal of the school had told me that at first he did not believe the students would be able to follow the lesson because they had just started learning English. He added that he was surprised.

Why was this class successful? First, students were able to understand the rationale of the lesson and also the objectives and expected outcomes of each task were clear. Second, the class was challenging for students but not impossible. Richards (1987) writes that if a task is too difficult, learners will give up but that if a task is too easy learners will become bored. The challenge for the teacher in conducting tasks is to find the middle-ground. Because the tasks assigned to students at Mizusawa JHS were novel, I went through great pains to ensure that the input students would receive contained mostly familiar words and grammar. It is my belief that a high frequency of unfamiliar language together with the required concentration to work out how to do a new activity would have been overwhelming for the students.

The third reason why the task was successful was because we were able to accomplish the objectives within the given time without rushing. It has been my experience that when students are rushed, their performance dramatically decreases. John Fanselow, former President of TESOL, said in a workshop in Sendai on February 22, “Students need time to think”. In this

class, students had time to think.

The last reason why this class was successful was that I was able to change the lesson plan as it was being carried out. TBT offers the teachers options of doing 1 to 3 phases per task as well as various choices within each phase. Because one is never 100% certain how much time it might take learners to complete a phase, sometimes it might be necessary to combine phases, drop a phase, or opt for an alternative choice within a phase to ensure that the class ends on time and that the students are not rushed.

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Appendix 1・Lesson Plan

指導課程	教師の働きかけ	生徒の反応・活動	留意点・効果
Introduction (5分)			
<p>この部屋の皆さんは、外国の方に会う機会がこれからたくさんあると私は思います。会う外国人の中には、日本語と英語が話せる、日本語と他の外国語が話せる、英語だけが話せる、他の外国語だけが話せる人がいます。このように、外国人に会う際、必ずしも英語で話さなければならないとは限りません。しかし、第2言語として世界の一番話されている言語は英語です。英語はイギリス人、オーストラリア人、アメリカ人、ニュージーランド人とコミュニケーションをとる手段だけでなく、世界の人々とコミュニケーションをとるためにも非常に役立ちます。だから、皆さんはいつか日本人ではない方と英語で話すことが必要になると私は思います。例えば外国に行ったり、外国の団体を日本で受け入れたらすれば、簡単なスピーチを聞き、簡単なスピーチを言うことが必要になると私は思います。今日の授業の目標は、英語で簡単なスピーチを聞き、文章を暗記せずにスピーチをすることです。</p> <p>まず、私たちは英語でのスピーチを聞きます。このスピーチを話している方は、英語を第2言語として話しています。次に、私たちは簡単なスピーチをします。この練習がいつか役立つようにと私は願っています。</p>			
Task 1: Listen to a Speech (20分)			
<p>Objective: Learning and recording Jan Oravec's personal information</p> <p>Real world language processes: Listening to a long speech for specific information, reviewing the answers with a partner.</p>			
Pre-Task	Jan Oravec の写真を見せる。難しい単語を教える。	生徒は Jan Oravec の 1.出身、2.職業、3.話せる言語、4.好きなことを予想する。	生徒がインタビューを聞く意欲を高めるために、Jan Oravec の情報を推測させる。 教材： (A) Listen to a speech のワーク・シート
Task	インタビューをすべて理解しなくても良く、特定の情報に集中しても良いことを生徒に伝える。	2回インタビューを見る。答えに丸をつける。	教材：DVD

Post-Task		英語で友達と答えを確認する。	教材: DVD (時間がなければ Post-Task を削る。)
指導課程	教師の働きかけ	生徒の反応・活動	留意点・効果
Task 2 : Give a Speech (20分)			
Objective: Say a speech relying only on keywords.			
Real world language processes: Giving a presentation using key words			
Pre-task Step 1: Write a speech	生徒にスピーチの構成を説明する。 1. Name (名前) 2. Residence (住まい) 3. Age (年齢) 4. What you like (好きなこと) 5. Which day? 何曜日に好きなことをする。	一人でスピーチを書く。	教材: (B) A Speech のワーク・シート
Pre-Task Step 2: Practice the speech	キーワードを使ったスピーチの仕方を実際にみせる。	一人で黒板に書いてあるキーワードを見てスピーチをする。	Task で言えるように、この段階でスピーチの練習をする。
Task: Say your speech	生徒にスピーチをするように指導する。	ペアーになってお互いにスピーチをする。	
Post-Task:		授業の前でスピーチをする。各スピーチが終わった後、全員でメモリー・ゲームを行う。	これを通して、クラスの好きなことを把握したい。
評価・感想 (5分)			

Appendix 2 – Listening Worksheet

A. Listening to a Speech

まず、Jan Oravec の出身 (1.)、職業 (2.)、話せる言語 (一ヶ国語以上)、(好きなこと)を推測して下さい。Jan Oravec のスピーチを聞いた後、自分の推測を確かめてください。

1. He is from _____ .

- | | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| ① Australia | ② Czech Republic (チェコ共和) | ③ England |
| ④ France | ⑤ Germany (ドイツ) | ⑥ Russia |
| ⑦ Slovakia (スロバキア) | ⑧ Spain | ⑨ Ukraine (ウクライナ) |

2. He is a _____ .

- | | | |
|----------|------------------|-------------------|
| ① Actor | ② Chemist (科学者) | ③ Cook |
| ④ Doctor | ⑤ Engineer (技術者) | ⑥ English Teacher |

3. He speaks _____

- | | | |
|-----------|-------------------|------------|
| ① Chinese | ② Czech (チェコ語) | ③ English |
| ④ French | ⑤ German (ドイツ語) | ⑥ Japanese |
| ⑦ Russian | ⑧ Slovak (スロバキア語) | ⑨ Spanish |

4. He likes _____

- | | | |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|
| ① Basketball | ② Cycling | ③ Fencing |
| ④ Judo | ⑤ Hiking | ⑥ Steak |

Appendix 3 – Speaking Worksheet

B. Giving a Speech

Jan Oravec のように、皆でスピーチを言いましょう。スピーチで自分の 1.名前、2.住まい、3.年齢、4.好きなこと、5.なん曜日に好きなことをするかを教えましょう。まず、下記の文の穴に自分の情報を書きましょう。(例を参照して下さい)

Hi. My name is _____. I live in
 お住まい _____ 年齢 _____
 _____. I am _____ years-old. I like
 好きなこと _____ 好きなことをする _____
 _____. I _____ on
 何曜日に _____

(例)

Hi. My name is James Hall. I live in Takamatsu, Morioka. I am 32 years-old.
 I ~~like~~ love the Boston Red Sox. I watch the Red Sox on everyday

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