

**Robert Stroud**

**Performance Goal-Setting and Feedback for  
Second Language Tasks. An Empirical Study  
of TBLT Group Discussions**

**Doctoral Thesis / Dissertation**

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**PERFORMANCE GOAL-SETTING AND FEEDBACK  
FOR SECOND LANGUAGE TASKS: AN EMPIRICAL  
STUDY OF TBLT GROUP DISCUSSIONS**

by

ROBERT STROUD

A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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March 2018

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis draws on a classroom-based empirical study to explore the actual effects that Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has on students' performance, when applied to group discussions, and the impacts that different forms of Goal-Setting and Feedback (GSF) have on their learning. In doing so, it challenges the assumptions in the research literature that TBLT will necessarily improve multiple aspects of performance within group discussions with low-level students, and reveals that applying GSF can lead to very different outcomes.

A longitudinal mixed-method approach was adopted using surveys and peer-interviews with 10 teachers, and observations, surveys and peer-interviews with 132 low-level students in a Japanese university. Students used product or process GSF alongside TBLT group discussions across a semester. Findings showed improvements in fluency and accuracy, positive feelings towards learning, and larger improvements for lower performers. Furthermore, product and process goals influenced students' focus differently in terms of individual performance, collaboration and discussion outcome. These findings create a clearer picture of the impact of TBLT, when applied to group discussions, and show how students' focus within learning can be greatly influenced by task goals. Resultant recommendations for course design, student and teacher training, and implementation of TBLT and GSF are given.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

**CAF** - Complexity, Accuracy and Fluency

**CLT** - Communicative Language Teaching

**FA** - Formative Assessment

**GSF** - Goal-Setting and Feedback (task performance focused and self-regulated by students)

**L2** - Second Language

**LPs/HPs** - Low Participators/High Participators (half of students who spoke the least/most in discussions at the start of the study)

**ProcS** - Process Students (used Process GSF sheet/diary during class across the semester)

**ProdS** - Product Students (used Product GSF sheet/diary during class across the semester)

**SLA** - Second Language Acquisition

**SRL** - Self-Regulated Learning

**TBLT** - Task-Based Language Teaching



## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Thesis focus and aims

This thesis is the third part of a Modular PhD investigating the use of Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) oral group discussion tasks for language learning with low-level learners. The overall aim of the PhD is to investigate and report on ways to improve the learning for students. This was done by firstly determining key factors affecting low-level Japanese university students' oral participation within discussions in the first module (see Appendix A for a summary), and then by examining the short-term effects on participation of *pre-discussion planning* (a significantly reported factor in the first module) with low-level Japanese university students in the second module (see Appendix B for a summary). The main finding was that when the students undertook such additional planning, they would speak more and with more fluency during discussions immediately afterwards.

Three of the other task design factors reported to potentially improve participation in the first module were related to 1) *having a scoring system for performance*, 2) *getting feedback on performance*, and 3) *seeing measurable progress of performance over time*. As a result, I decided to focus this thesis on these three factors by investigating the effects on TBLT group discussion learning of self-regulated performance Goal-Setting and Feedback (GSF) via a semester-long classroom-based study. Data in this thesis considers observable changes in performance by Japanese university students due to the use of a TBLT approach to group discussions, changes observed with the use of two different types of GSF (task product versus process focused), and self-reported feelings of the students towards the learning undertaken. The findings contribute to TBLT and goal-related research by examining the suitability of TBLT group discussions as an

approach to improving language use with low-level learners and how GSF may support the learning or not.

## **1.2 Background and research motivation**

Upon entering university, most Japanese students have studied English since an elementary school age, most recently with five years of mainly grammar-focused English instruction in Junior and Senior High School involving translating between Japanese and English, known as the *yakudoku* method (Gorsuch, 1998; Nishino, 2008; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). Such classes have often not involved Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches to second language learning, such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), resulting in limited chances for students to interact orally with each other in English. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) laid out plans in 2013 to enable students to hold conversations in English by the time they leave High School in preparation for the Olympic Games in Tokyo in 2020 (MEXT, 2013). If such ambitious goals are to be met, they require careful consideration with regards to the teaching of conversation skills during high school and into courses at the university level. However, because of the pressure placed on high school students to pass university entrance exams in Japan (Aspinall, 2005) classroom learning focuses mainly on the content of such tests via the *yakudoku* method. As a result, little time is left for orally interactive tasks, resulting in university students' oral English communicative competence being often limited to simple exchanges at best (King, 2012, 2013, p. 72).

I have been teaching English within Japan for ten years at the time of writing this thesis, having taught English communication skills at the elementary, high school, university and business-level. Of specific relevance to the focus of this thesis, I taught English communication courses at Kwansei Gakuin University in Kansai, Japan, between 2013 and 2016, and have been teaching similar courses at Hosei University in Tokyo since 2016. From my own experience of working within universities in Japan, students undertaking group discussion tasks have seldom experienced goal-setting for discussion performance, nor been provided with specific feedback to help focus their efforts on improving their performance related to such goals. However, a large amount of recent research, including some of my own, suggests that helping students focus on specific task performance goals and feedback can improve their motivation, efforts made, participation within classwork, and performance across time (Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Troetschel, 2001; Hart & Albarracín, 2009; Moskowitz & Grant, 2009; Stroud, 2017).

The number of choices available to teachers for implementing performance goals and feedback for oral tasks are vast (Lai, 2015; Leung, 1999; Leung & Lewkowicz, 2006; Norris, 2008) and are often subjective scale ratings of measures such as 'fluency', 'accuracy' and 'complexity' (such as in the TOEIC, TOEFL and IELTS speaking tests). A focus on such scoring can often leave students without an understanding of how to focus their efforts to improve in the future (Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling, 1997; Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010). From what I have seen in Japan, feedback on classroom discussions also often comes in the form of such subjective, non-specific scale ratings from classmates or the teacher. I do not believe that this helps students understand their performance with enough detail, nor provide them with any

measurable progress on that performance over time to understand how to focus future efforts to improve. If Japanese students are expected to improve their performance across courses, they require specific and measurable goals to become motivated to take part in classwork (Moskowitz & Grant, 2009), as well as clear, specific, and ongoing feedback which provides them with what is called 'assessment for learning' (Dann, 2002) via a 'formative' style of feedback (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Harlen & James, 1997; Sadler, 1998; Tunstall & Gipps, 1996; Wiliam, 2018).

Several challenges exist for the implementation of goals and feedback into classroom group discussions. Firstly, it can be unclear for teachers and students how they should focus efforts within performance, such as goals related to individual speaking turns, interactions between speakers, or the outcome of the discussion itself. Secondly, there may be a lack of time for the use of goals or feedback within class. Such extra workload may take away from the time required for practising the use of the language. Also, English communication class sizes can sometimes be too large for the teacher to be able to spend time observing individual students across a course, in order to give them detailed individual feedback. Goals and feedback may need to be self-regulated by students themselves to avoid such issues with time. Thirdly, individual differences, such as learning preferences and English-speaking ability, can make the use of goals and feedback more difficult for some students than others. Lower-level students may already be struggling to perform within discussions alongside higher-level English speakers, and the additional workload of goals and feedback may actually have negative effects on their performance. Therefore, any goals or feedback used should be as quick and simple to use as possible. Lastly, any performance feedback provided to students needs to be clear and specific, but this may be difficult to do in a limited amount of time within classes.

Detailed research projects which investigate the development of student performance and feelings towards group discussions across time are scarce, even though this data would prove very helpful for teachers who are struggling to improve English oral interactions within their classes. Due to the extensive positive research which exists about the use of goals and feedback to improve classroom learning (see Chapter Four), as well as my own research and the findings in the first module (Appendix A), I decided to focus this study on how combined performance GSF might be self-regulated by students in typical English communication courses within Japanese universities to improve the learning with TBLT group discussions. I believe that such an approach is an important topic of future language learning research, as it can potentially help students understand their ability better (as determined by the goals and feedback used) and focus more on improving across time.

### **1.3 Research questions**

The research questions within the study were selected to help improve the understanding of the potential effects of using a TBLT approach and GSF to support learning undertaken during classroom group discussions. With regards to the GSF used in the study, *goals* were those focused on discussion task performance which were set by students themselves within their electronic diaries (Appendices E and F) prior to each classroom discussion. *Feedback* for students referred to that which was provided by 1) audio recordings of group discussions, 2) notes which students took on their own discussion sheets and 3) the excel tables showing performance over time within the electronic diaries. The main overall RQ addressed was:

**Main RQ: *‘What are the effects on learning of using Goal-Setting and Feedback (GSF) with TBLT group discussions across a semester?’***

I decided to approach this RQ by breaking it down into three separate RQs. The first RQ was used to specify what type of goals should be used with the students in the study. The second RQ then addressed observable changes in student performance over time with a TBLT approach, as well as with two different types of GSF used, including differences between students who spoke less (Low Participators) or more than others in discussions (High Participators) at the start of the study. The third RQ addressed self-reported student feelings towards undertaking TBLT discussions and the two types of GSF used (ProdS using Product GSF and ProcS using Process GSF). Within the study, Product GSF focused on goals related to the outcome at the *end* of discussions (the final group choice, reasons, examples and other possible choices and reasons), while Process GSF focused on goals related to the interactions which took place *during* the discussions (the number of opinions, reasons, examples, questions, answers, agreements and disagreements). The three RQs were:

**RQ1: *What are appropriate discussion performance goals for the Japanese university students in this study?***

**RQ2: (a) *How does observable discussion task performance change for the students across a semester using a TBLT approach (regardless of the type of GSF used)?***

**(b) *What different effects do Product and Process GSF have on observable performance across a semester?***

*(c) Are these effects the same for Low and High Participators?*

**RQ3:** *(a) How do ProdS and ProcS report feeling about performing in discussions across the semester?*

*(b) How do they report feeling about the support the two types of GSF provided for their learning (or not)?*

The findings for these RQs make important contributions to research by providing original data on the longitudinal effects which a TBLT approach to group discussions can have with low-level learners (in and out of Japan), as well as the impact which the addition of GSF has on learning. This is beneficial to both researchers and teachers currently using or wishing to apply such approaches to their own language courses.

#### **1.4 Thesis outline**

In line with the RQs above, the theoretical background discussed in this thesis addresses three main themes within Chapters Two, Three and Four. Firstly, a background to the current use of group discussions within language learning classrooms is examined, with particular attention given to the common use of a Task-Based Language Teaching approach. Secondly, a discussion of the literature connected to appropriately measuring group discussion performance for students is provided. Thirdly, the potential effects on performance and learning of the design of goal-setting and feedback for group discussions is discussed using current research and theories related to goal-setting, formative assessment and performance rubrics.

In Chapter Five, the methodology of the semester-long classroom study undertaken is explained. This includes a rationale for the mixed-methods approach taken for the data collection and analysis, details of the participants and procedures, specific details of the data collection for the three separate RQs, and the ethical considerations within the study.

In Chapter Six, the results, discussion and limitations for all three RQs are given. The first part discusses the observational data collected from a classroom pilot, as well as self-reported survey and interview data from teachers, which were used to create the two types of GSF in the study (RQ1). The second part summarizes the changes in student performance across the semester with TBLT groups discussions using the two different types of GSF via classroom observations (RQ2). The third part explores reasons for the changes seen in RQ2 by using data regarding student feelings towards their performance in discussions over time and the two types of GSF used with data from self-reported surveys, interviews and my own observations during classes and tests (RQ3).

In Chapter Seven, conclusions are reached about the use of TBLT group discussions as an approach to language learning with low-level learners and the effects of GSF. Based on these findings, the contributions made to research, recommendations for language teaching, overall limitations for the thesis, as well as recommended future research directions are explained.



## **CHAPTER 2. LANGUAGE LEARNING WITH TBLT DISCUSSIONS**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter is made up of three main sections which gives an overview of TBLT group discussions as an approach to the learning and teaching of spoken English. The lack of classroom-based research to understand the actual effects of such an approach on student performance is highlighted and later analyzed using longitudinal data within the study. This chapter is focused mainly on how students and teachers may be benefiting or not from such a TBLT approach, and also how it may compare to a more traditional alternative approach called Present, Practise, Produce (PPP). The first section discusses relevant literature for understanding how students may acquire a second language through oral use of the language during tasks. The second section discusses the potential benefits and challenges to both learning and teaching with the use of group discussions within English communication courses. The third section gives an overview of the Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach to classroom group discussions, as well as the potential benefits and problems for both students and teachers with using it in general and specifically within Japan.

### **2.2 SLA in English communication classes**

#### **2.2.1 Oral communication and SLA**

The processes through which students may acquire a second language needs careful consideration, so that courses can be designed to assist that acquisition. The two main, but contrasting, perspectives for this are the *nativist* and *interactionist* viewpoints, which will now be

discussed. Within this thesis, I do not make any conclusions as to which of these viewpoints is more likely to be correct for SLA. I explain how they both relate to orally interactive tasks, as well as highlight the lack of empirical data which currently exists to show how language use can develop across time within interactive tasks (such as group discussions), which the data in the study provides.

The *nativist* viewpoint within SLA is that it is the natural internal mechanisms of a student working on the language they hear and prepare to say which leads to SLA and resultant communicative competence. A specific example is Krashen's (1985) *Input Hypothesis*, which suggests that learning a language is more about acquiring it through input, rather than learning it through interacting and responding to others. In addition to this, the *Output Hypothesis* (Swain, 1985, 1995) states that it is important for students to orally produce language in order to improve at it, because it promotes noticing, experimenting, and becoming more structured and accurate at speaking through self-reflection of mistakes made and difficulties experienced. A more in-depth discussion of these theories is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, they both suggest that improving the oral communicative competence of students is mainly about having them practise listening to and understanding the speech of others, as well as producing their own speech by going through the internal processes of language production described as *conceptualizing*, *formulating* and *articulating* (De Bot, 1992; Levelt, 1989). In a second language communication course, this could involve a high focus on listening tasks and monologue speeches for example.

However, the *interactionist* viewpoint of SLA is that language acquisition occurs as a result of social interactions between speakers, rather than just the internal processing of input or output of speech. *Sociocultural Theory* (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) highlights the need for speakers to use

the language to interact with others in a social context, in order for meaning-negotiation and hypothesis-testing to be present and drive SLA. Furthermore, Long (1989) stated that Krashen's input hypothesis (discussed above) is only practical for SLA if the input is comprehensible and if interactions between learners help clarify misunderstandings. The *Interaction Hypothesis* (Hatch, 1978; Long, 1996) states that interaction created by tasks helps students improve their language use, as opportunities are provided to attend to problems using the language within specific contexts. The modifications which take place in the negotiation of meaning and new utterances which are used to clarify meaning between speakers as a result, are believed to lead to SLA. This theory of learning has also been referred to as the *Interactionist Approach* (Gass & Mackey, 2007), proponents of which hold that learners who use meaningful and functional dialogue in an interactive way will be practising a more 'authentic' style of language use than within individual tasks and will become better at using the language (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2013, p. 157; Savignon, 2002). Such language practice has been shown in studies to lead to better performance in future interactions (Gass & Varonis, 1994; Pica, 1994). In addition, the *Socio-Interactionist* view of SLA (Firth & Wagner, 2007; Sun, 2011) is very similar to the interaction hypothesis discussed above, as it suggests that interactions between speakers are key for SLA, not only because they practise using the language, but also because it is done within a social context and that the social interactions which students have are more supportive of the learning than their cognitive processes of producing sentences of speech. More classroom-based research is required at this time to see how/if students who practise second-language speaking skills through interactive tasks (such as group discussions) will acquire the language, as the above theories

suggest, as little empirical evidence exists to show this (Keck, Iberri-Shea, Tracy-Ventura & Wambaleka, 2006).

### 2.2.2 Orally interactive tasks and SLA considerations

Following on from the section above, and assuming that *interaction* plays an important role in SLA, teachers also need to consider some other important cognitive processes involved in the learning. Firstly, the *working memory* of students is limited and will determine how much pre-formulated language they can draw upon whilst interacting with others (Baddeley, 1986, 1993; Baddeley & Hitch, 1974). Skehan (1996, 1998, p. 97) suggests that students have a *limited capacity* for learning, and that tasks which require attention on certain elements in performance leave students without enough 'attention resources' to focus on other elements. However, Robinson (2001, 2003, 2007) opposes this belief, saying students can draw on different 'pools' of attention at the same time. For example, students trying to speak with higher accuracy, by making less errors in speech, may speak less fluently, by speaking more slowly (or vice-versa). Whether students can focus on and improve different aspects of performance at the same time or not requires further research, to better understand any cognitive limitations within learning for students.

Secondly, the *cognitive load* (Candlin, 1987) which orally interactive tasks put on students may cause problems with their learning. Asking students to interact in English requires consideration of what Skehan (1998, p. 99) describes as 'code complexity' (how difficult the language required for the task is), 'cognitive complexity' (how complex the task is to undertake), as well as 'cognitive processing' and 'communicative stress' (the amount of organizing and

processing of language required within the task time available). Teachers must ensure that these demands on students are not so high that they do not prevent interactions between students which are expected to lead to SLA.

Thirdly, there is a clear lack of current research data to link theories of interaction (Section 2.2.1) to SLA in *group* discussions across time. The studies mentioned by Gass and Varonis (1994) and Pica (1994) were only for pair interactions and only considered improvements in language use across very short periods of time. It cannot be assumed that the same effects of interactional tasks will occur within larger group sizes or in the longer-term within classes. As discussed above, some studies (such as Keck et al., 2006) suggest that there is no proven connection between oral interaction and SLA. This study provides more data related to this by making connections between the oral interactions which take place during group discussions and how performance within those discussions changes over time (Section 6.3). This helps teachers see more clearly if time invested in learning through group discussions is in fact leading to improvements in language use or not.

## **2.3 The group discussion approach to language learning**

### **2.3.1 Potential learning and teaching benefits of group discussions**

Orally interactive tasks, involving two or more students, are a commonly used approach to promote language learning, as they are believed to create the interactional setting necessary for SLA to occur (Section 2.2). The interactions which occur between multiple students are also believed to be of a higher 'quality' than within individual or whole-class tasks because of the variation in language use amongst speakers which will lead to comprehensible input necessary

for SLA (Long, 1990; Long & Porter, 1985), although more empirical data is needed to show this. Through working with other students to practise negotiating meaning by clarifying, questioning, responding to questions, disagreeing, and giving opinions, students are more likely to become communicatively competent than practising giving opinions through monologue-style speeches for instance (Lynch & Anderson, 1992; Rignall & Furneaux, 1997). Also, having two or more students discuss topics is believed to be more beneficial for learning than one-to-one with a teacher. This is because discussions between peers are more representative of authentic communication between speakers of a similar level, compared to discussions which are controlled and supported by a teacher (Johnson, 2001).

Other potential pedagogical benefits exist for the use of *groups* (involving three or more students) rather than *individual*, *pair* or *whole class* tasks. Discussions within groups are believed to offer a more positive affective climate than with a teacher or in front of a class for example (Long, 1985, 1990; Long & Porter, 1985). They can be a more intimate, private and supportive setting for students, where making mistakes and receiving feedback on errors creates less anxiety amongst students. Also, group discussions offer students more individualized speaking time and feedback compared to whole-class tasks (Foster, 1998; Long, 1977). They give students more individual freedom in their choice of speech content and language skills to focus on improving, as well as feedback from students within the same group. In addition, if students practise in groups of three or more, teachers will be able to watch a larger percentage of classroom discussions during classes, as there are fewer discussions taking place at the same time (as opposed to a higher number of pair or individual discussions for the same class). This more frequent *Teacher-Based Assessment* style of feedback during class is expected to lead to