

Input-based Tasks in Foreign Language Instruction for Young Learners

Natsuko Shintani

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9

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Input-based Tasks in Foreign Language Instruction for Young Learners

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Volume 9

Input-based Tasks in Foreign Language Instruction for Young Learners
by Natsuko Shintani

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Series Editors' Preface

Since its inception, the series *Task-Based Language Teaching: Issues, Research and Practice* has seen 'issues' as focal, and their relationship to both research and practice as fundamental. Although all our volumes are inevitably articulated around issues that authors see as critical, it is equally inevitable that the weight they each attach to the dimensions of research and of practice will vary. With this in mind, it is a special pleasure to welcome Natsuko Shintani's volume to the series.

As the reader will see from its opening chapter, the entire volume is rooted in a practical classroom issue, as it was experienced at first hand by the author, namely how to teach English to young, absolute beginning learners. In order to find potential solutions, practical challenges (e.g., based on cultural and institutional traditions of language education) first had to be conceptualised, in order to enable the formulation of alternative approaches that might prove effective. This in turn led to relevant background research, trial and error, and subsequently to the planning and implementation of a carefully thought-through and reflectively implemented classroom-based innovation as well as its empirical investigation. The result is a volume which we are delighted to include in this series. Indeed, this work represents the kind of "researched pedagogy" that we have hoped to encourage through the series, and which we believe to be the ultimate justification for a task-based approach to education.

This volume has a number of distinctive qualities, above all combining a range of elements that might be considered key for a genuinely applied linguistic and researched pedagogic publication: firstly, it starts from a personal narrative, including sensitive description and careful documentation of the immediate and wider educational context, as well as associated challenges for educational innovation. Next, the theoretical backgrounding it provides is motivated both theoretically and practically, leading to a statement of probable best practice under the given teaching and learning circumstances. The design and implementation of the investigation are systematic from both practical and epistemological perspectives, and clearly explained. Qualitative and quantitative data are used to complement each other, leading to a triangulated set of findings that offer deep insights into the process and product of the task-based innovation at hand. Finally, the book is written in a way that is accessible throughout to researchers and practitioners alike.

Thus we believe that the resulting publication is an important and cutting-edge contribution, not just to the series and to the field of TBLT, but to applied linguistics in general.

Martin Bygate, John Norris, Kris van den Branden
Series Editors

Getting started with task-based teaching

This book is an account of my experience of task-based language teaching (TBLT) with very young, beginner learners in a small private language school in Japan. My dissatisfaction with traditional approaches to teaching English involving presentation-practice-production (PPP) led me to experiment with TBLT to see whether it could be an effective way to promote second language learning in children in a so-called ‘acquisition poor’ context like Japan. My primary focus in this book is to report on a study that compared these two different approaches to language teaching, both in terms of instructional practices and learning outcomes. In this introductory chapter, however, I would like to provide a more personal account of my experience with the two approaches to show readers why I came to reject PPP and to switch to TBLT in my own teaching. My hope is that the ‘story’ I have to tell will provide a concrete context for the more academic chapters that follow and also provide a practical example of what TBLT can offer teachers such as myself.

The starting point – presentation, practice, production (PPP)

I started my new career as a language teacher in a large private language institution where I taught English to young children aged three to eleven years. However, after a while I became somewhat disillusioned, as students who had studied English at the school for several years still had very limited communicative proficiency in English (e.g., they were only able to provide brief answers to simple questions). I thought this was because the children only took lessons once or twice a week and the lessons themselves were of very short duration (i.e., 40 or 60 minutes). I believed that more frequent and longer lessons were needed to allow the students to practice more and this would help them to acquire communicative ability more rapidly. This made me decide to start my own school in Toyota city in Japan where I lived. The first job at my school was to design a curriculum. I decided to provide longer lessons than other language schools and so offered the students one 90-minute lesson per week.

I devised a format for lessons partly based on my teaching experience and partly based on the teacher’s guide attached to the ready-made course book I employed in my school. The course book was the *Let’s Go* series (Nakata, Frazier, Hoskins, & Graham, 2007), one of the bestselling books at that time in Japan. It consisted of a set

of six books for children of primary school age (about 6 to 12 years old). As in many course books for young learners, the six books introduced vocabulary and grammar points roughly sequenced from easy to difficult. A typical book had eight units, each of which presented and engaged learners in the practice of some target words and one or two grammatical structures. The Teacher's Book for this series emphasized three basic steps: (1) teach the target words first in isolation (e.g., "pencil"), (2) practise them in sentences (e.g., "It's a pencil"), and finally (3) practise them in question-and-answer sequences (e.g., "What's this?" → "It's a pencil"). The course book also recommended teaching the question ("What's this?") and the answer ("It's a pencil") separately before combining them into a 'conversation'. My teaching was based on the recommended methodology for this book but also introduced a number of innovations. I will first describe a typical 90-minute lesson in my school and then outline the additional activities I devised.

Unit 2 in *Let's Go Book 1* introduced 11 colour adjectives and two target sentences: "What colour is this?" and "It's (colour)". The lesson began with a warm-up session where I greeted the students and asked their names in English. Then I instructed the students to open the page of the text book to the day's lesson. The page first showed the 11 different colours on a colour palette. I modeled the oral form of each colour word followed by a production exercise requesting the students to repeat each word after the teacher. At this stage, the target words were produced in isolation. Then I introduced each target word in the first target sentence (e.g., "It's green"), translating the sentence into Japanese. This was followed by a substitution exercise where I pointed to each colour and asked the students to make sentences such as "It's green". Then I introduced the other target sentence, "What colour is this?" using the pictures in the text book which depicted a number of colour paint jars on shelves. First, the students repeated chorally after the teacher's model (e.g., "what colour is this? It's orange"). Then, they took part in teacher-led choral production practice of a simple two-part dialogue:

Teacher: What colour is this?

Class: It's green.

Finally they worked in pairs to practice the same dialogue. This part of the lesson concluded with a simple listening activity where the students listened to audio-recorded sentences, such as "What colour is this? It's green" and circled the correct colour in their book.

The additional activities I devised were intended to enable further practice of the target items and structures in the 90-minute lesson. My idea was to provide the students with an opportunity for using the target features more extensively and more communicatively. One of the activities that was popular in my school was called "Stepping Game". This was a competitive game that involved the students in naming the objects shown in pictures or making a sentence containing the target word. I arranged colour

flash cards on the floor of the classroom and then asked two students to step onto one of the cards. One student said “What colour is this?” and the other replied by naming the colour (e.g., “It’s blue”). They scored points if they could successfully complete this mini dialogue. The students competed in teams, and the team that scored the most points was declared the winner. The second activity was a “Tell-and-Do task”, which I designed to provide a more communicative context for practicing the target items. The students worked in pairs. One student was given a sheet with just numbers written on it. The other student had a sheet with a colour next to each number. This student had to say the name of the colour next to each number so that his/her partner could draw in the colour next to the correct number on his/her sheet. I walked around the class helping out when a student was unable to name a colour correctly.

Although I did not realize it at the time, the lesson format I followed involved the traditional presentation-practice-production (PPP) sequence (Byrnes, 1986; Ur, 1996). It started with the presentation of a language feature, followed by controlled practice exercises using the materials in the text book. My additional activities then encouraged freer production of the target items and structures. By providing opportunities for the students to produce the target words and sentences in both mechanical drills and more communicative activities I hoped that the students would learn and remember what they had been taught and would develop the ability to communicate in English.

However, as time passed I became more and more doubtful about the efficacy of the approach I had adopted. As the students who had first enrolled in my school got older, I recognized the same problem I had experienced earlier. Their communicative abilities still failed to develop. I noted that although they were able to produce the structures they had learned in the context in which they had learned them, they were still not able to use them in real communication (i.e., outside of the classroom activities). One of the typical questions I received from parents was, “When is my child going to start speaking English?” I found myself asking: “If the students can only use the structures they practice intensively and repeatedly in the lessons in which they were taught, how many lessons would be needed to teach sufficient structures thoroughly enough for them to be able to communicate freely?” In fact, many of the students stopped coming to the school before they had acquired any real communicative skills. As a result, I came to the conclusion that PPP was not very effective for developing communicative ability in young, beginner learners in Japan.

Moving forward – task-based language teaching

As a consequence of this experience, I started to look for a radically different approach – one that was more compatible with how learners learn a second language (L2) and one

that would be well-suited to my young children. The second language acquisition (SLA) literature (Long, 1985; Skehan, 1998; Ellis, 2003) pointed me in a potentially interesting direction – task-based language teaching. I was also encouraged by the work of Willis (1996) that provided a clear framework for conducting a task-based lesson.

The essential difference between PPP and TBLT lies in how language is viewed and consequently what happens in the classroom. In the case of PPP, language is dissected into bits which are then treated as ‘objects’ to be taught one at a time. In the case of TBLT, language is treated as a tool for ‘doing things’, that is, activities are primary. Such an approach accorded well with how children naturally orientate to language and how they had learned their first language (L1). I also noted that TBLT does not just aim to foster communicative skills; it also aims to assist learners to acquire linguistic features incidentally through engaging them in focus-on-form activities embedded within meaningful communication.

The central construct in TBLT is ‘task’. Lessons are built around tasks. I began, therefore, by ensuring that I had a clear grasp of what a ‘task’ was. Ellis (2003) proposed that a ‘task’ must satisfy four basic criteria:

1. The primary focus should be on ‘meaning’ (i.e., learners should be mainly concerned with encoding and decoding messages not with focusing on linguistic form).
2. There should be some kind of ‘gap’ (i.e., a need to convey information, to express an opinion or to infer meaning).
3. Learners should largely rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic) in order to complete the activity. That is, learners are not told what language forms they should use to perform a task although they may be able to ‘borrow’ from the input the task provided to help them perform it and in some cases limited pre-teaching of language can take place.
4. There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language (i.e., the language serves as the means for achieving the outcome, not as an end in its own right). Thus, when performing a task, learners are not primarily concerned with using language correctly but rather with achieving the goal stipulated by the task.

I also needed to consider how to construct a whole task-based lesson. I noted that many TBLT researchers had suggested the use of three principal phases; a pre-task phase, a main-task phase, and a post-task phase (e.g., Estaire & Zanon 1994; Willis 1996). Ellis (2003) suggested ways in which teachers can adjust the difficulty of a task-based lesson in each of these phases (see Table 1.1). For example, the pre-task options listed in Table 1.1 can make the task easier while time pressure in the main task phase can make it more difficult. There were a number of options for focusing on form in all the three phases (e.g., pre-teaching language in the pre-task phase, providing

contextual support in the main task, and ‘language work’ in the post-task phase). The pre-teaching language aims at helping students learn other aspects of language during the task by equipping them with some language to perform the task comfortably, but without aiming to proceduralise it through practice, as in the first phase of PPP (i.e. presentation). I decided to use some of these options to make the tasks suitable for my students.

Table 1.1. Implementation options in the different phases of a task-based lesson (based on Ellis, 2003)

Phase	Options	Description
Pre-task phase	1. Modelling performance of the task	1. Students listen or watch the task being performed by ‘experts’.
	2. Pre-teaching language	2. The teacher presents language that will be useful for performing the task.
	3. Schema-building	3. The teacher elicits and extends students’ knowledge of the topic of the task.
	4. Strategic planning	4. The students are given time to prepare to perform the task before they actually perform it.
Main-task phase	1. Time pressure	1. Students are given only a limited amount of time to perform the task.
	2. Contextual support	2. Students are allowed access to the input data when they perform the task.
	3. Explicit instruction	3. The teacher takes time out from the performance of the task to explicitly teach a linguistic feature that is useful for performing the task.
	4. Surprise element	4. Additional information relevant to the task is provided after the students have started to perform the task.
Post-task phase	1. Repeat performance	1. Students are asked to repeat the task.
	2. Report	2. Students are asked to report the outcome of the task to the whole class.
	3. Language work	3. Students complete language exercises related to linguistic problems that they experienced when performing the task.

I first tried out TBLT with older children (aged 10 to 12), as it seemed easier to do so with students who already had some English knowledge and the ability to produce some English. In one lesson I used a task I called the Map Task. This involved the students working in pairs. Each member of a pair was given the same map but only one of them had a starting point, a goal, and the route marked on the map. In accordance

with Ellis' definition, this task required a primary focus on meaning, there was a gap (only one student had the route marked on it), the learners had to rely on their own linguistic resources (although I did provide some help with the language needed to describe the route), and there was a clearly defined outcome (the student had to draw the route that his/her partner described on his/her map).

The lesson proceeded like this. I began by asking the students to name shops or facilities in their own neighbourhood in English. I wrote the words on the board; if the students did not know the English word, I told it to them. This served a double purpose – 'pre-teaching' the key words and 'schema-building' in the above table. The list of words was also available to the students as they performed the task so they could refer to it anytime they needed to (i.e., it provided some linguistic support for the main task). I then performed a version of the task with all the students, illustrating how to describe the route on the map while the students drew it in on their individual maps. I encouraged the students to ask me questions. In this way I 'modelled' how to undertake the task as suggested by Prabhu (1987), and at the same time I provided the students with input containing the expressions they could use when they performed the task in pairs.

In the main task phase, the students worked on similar Map Tasks in pairs. They repeated the task twice with a different route each time. Then they performed the task a third time but I introduced a "surprise element". This time the two maps were not identical, and so the students also needed to solve the referential problems that arose as they worked through the task. When they realized there were differences in their maps, I told them that one of the maps was an older version.

For the post-task phase, I asked the students to make their own Map Task in pairs. I gave them two blank sheets and asked them to draw the maps making sure that there were some differences in the location of different building on the two maps. Finally, the students exchanged their maps with other students and performed the task again. Throughout the lesson, I helped the students by answering questions and providing feedback on their production. When necessary, I also provided some model sentences to help them give directions. However, the students' primary focus was always on the task outcome rather than accurate production of English. It required them to treat language as a tool, not as an object to be learned. The students had to work together to collaboratively exchange information and, as in real-life communication, deal with any communication problems that arose.

What impressed me was how the students were prepared to struggle to cope with the problems the Map Task posed for them. This was particularly evident when the students realized that their maps contained some referential problems. They did their best to use their limited English knowledge to deal with these. When making their own Map Task in pairs, they mostly used Japanese but code-switched into English at times. However, when they started to work on the Map Task created by a different pair,

they only used English. From watching the students perform this task I discovered a number of important points about task-based teaching. First, the task created a context where the students felt it was comfortable and natural to use English. Second, it was not necessary to insist on the use of English all the time. Third, I recognized the benefits of asking them to perform the same kind of task several times (see Bygate, 2015, on task repetition). These understandings informed the approach I adopted in the study reported later in this book.

Input-based TBLT

The Map task – like most of the tasks discussed in the TBLT literature – requires productive ability on the part of students and thus was clearly not suited to another group of students in my school – six year olds who were complete beginners. These were to be the participants in the study I later designed. For such learners, it was essential that I found a way of adapting tasks. I decided to use input-based tasks. These are tasks that require only a non-verbal response from students, while not prohibiting them from attempting to produce language if they so wish. Input-based tasks must still satisfy the four criteria for tasks listed above. In the case of the third criterion (i.e., learners use their own resources) learners need to use both their linguistic and non-linguistic resources (i.e., context and world knowledge) to process the input they are exposed to as part of the task.

I looked first for an example of an input-based task in the SLA research literature and found one in Ellis, Tanaka, and Yamazaki's (1994) study. This seemed especially relevant as it also involved Japanese learners of English, albeit much older than the learners I planned to work with. This study was conducted in a whole-class context. The task – called the Kitchen Task – involved the students listening to the teacher's instructions about where to place various objects in a kitchen. The students were given numbered pictures of these objects and a matrix picture of a kitchen. To show they had understood an instruction they had to locate the correct picture of the object and then write its number in the correct position in the picture of the kitchen. Ellis, Tanaka, and Yamazaki (1994) used this task to investigate the effects of different kinds of input on learners' comprehension and their acquisition of new words, which they used to label the kitchen objects. I was especially interested in one of the conditions they investigated – what the authors called 'interactionally modified input' – as this also involved the students requesting clarification if they could not understand one of the teacher's instructions. I planned to allow my six year olds to also interact if they wanted to.

The kind of input-based task that Ellis et al. investigated was a 'listen-and-do task' (i.e., the students had to listen to the teacher's instruction and respond by performing the appropriate action). Listen-and-do tasks seemed ideal for young children, as they

created an interactional context very similar to what they must have experienced when learning their L1. Later in Chapter 5, I provide a full description of the tasks I developed. Here I offer a brief description of one of them. For the “Zoo and Supermarket Task” I designed a number of flash cards depicting different animals and foods. I also designed a three-sided board with pictures of the ‘zoo’ and the ‘supermarket’ and small pockets to hold the flash cards. The task worked in this way: I told the students that the purpose of the task was to help the zoo or the supermarket by finding the right cards and placing them in a pocket in the holder. Then I gave instructions which required the students to select the correct card and hold it up. Those students who had chosen the correct card placed it in the pocket on the board. Those students who displayed the wrong card were told to put it in their individual ‘incorrect’ box. The student with the most cards in the folder was announced as the winner. Of course, as they were complete beginners, initially the children could not understand the instructions. This led to attempts on their part – using their L1 – to address their non-understanding, and interactional work on my part to help them achieve understanding.

As will become clear when I report the study, these listen-and-do tasks resulted in interactions that were very different from those that occurred in my traditional PPP classes. They also involved fundamental differences in the students’ attitudes to learning English (i.e., a shift from seeing English as ‘study’ requiring the memorization of words and patterns to viewing it as a tool for achieving a communicative outcome). The tasks, of course, involved the students in a constant struggle to understand the instructions. I realized that this struggle was an essential element of task-based teaching. In Chapter 3, I will consider why this is so.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have given a personal account of my experience of teaching Japanese children. This experience was the foundation of the research that I report later in the book. I discovered that it was not necessary to narrowly determine which specific items were to be taught in order to plan a lesson and that an alternative approach was to select tasks that could create a context for both pedagogic and communicative work with the students. I realized the limitations of an approach that sought to present discrete language items and practice them in isolation in mechanical type drills, and that even when these were complemented with more communicative activities it did not seem to enable the learners to use what they had been taught in real communication. This led me to experiment with a radically different approach based on tasks and to try to find ways in which I could assist my learners to perform them. I observed that the learners were not flustered when they found they did not possess the English they needed to perform a task but were prepared to struggle, using their L1 and the support

I provided them, to try to complete the task. I saw how the children's attitudes changed from viewing English as an object to be 'learned' to treating it as a tool for purposeful communication, and how this created a context in which English could be acquired naturally. Finally, I understood the importance of my own role as a teacher in TBLT. I was no longer a provider of knowledge but a co-participant who could guide the learners in their struggle to complete a task.

An obvious question, however, is the extent to which the task-based approach I adopted is feasible in an educational system such as that found in Japan. It does not necessarily follow that, because I was able to introduce TBLT in my own school, where the classes were small and where I had complete control over the curriculum, it would also be possible to introduce it more broadly for teaching young learners in the Japanese elementary school system. In the next chapter I consider the problems of achieving this and how they might be overcome, before moving on to a fuller treatment of my own efforts at implementing TBLT for young learners.