

The Case for a Task-Teach-Task (TTT) Approach in the Japanese University EFL Speaking Context

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Abstract

This forum paper proposes that an active learning methodology, specifically TTT or test/task-teach-test/teach (see Willis and Willis, 2007), should be employed when teaching EFL speaking to Japanese university ELL's. The rationale for this position extends from pedagogical grounds to also include the affective and cognitive arenas. Leveraging relevant theory, the paper outlines how a TTT approach could address the noted lack of returns on Japan's substantial investment in ELT by promoting student buy-in while also corresponding to the latest trends emerging from greater applied linguistic thought vis-à-vis proficiency development and progression.

Key words: Japanese EFL, University EFL Speaking, TTT

Introduction

Japan's interest in ELT has been noteworthy, possible methodological issues notwithstanding. From Nakahama Manjirō's seminal textbook, *Ei-Bei Taiwa Shokei*, to the *Nova Usagi*, English and the study of the English language has had a prominent place in the rich fabric of Japan's education experience (Minoru, 1995). To be sure, the Japanese have committed themselves to developing their English proficiency given its prominent role in this globalized world where English proficiency helps to increase one's human capital (Graddol, 2006). This is evidenced by the numerous ELT initiatives found at different levels in the Japanese education system and the government's oversight of them. (Chen, 2014).

Despite this interest and focus, the results have been lacking. The 2015 Education First English Proficiency Index (EF EPI, 2015) rankings saw Japan ranked 30th out of 70 countries with countries that have lesser international economic and political standing such as Romania and Malaysia ranked ahead of her. This finding might be seen as troubling to some given the significant amount of investment in both time and energy that Japan has made into its English development. Chen (2014) posited that this limited return on investment has occurred in Japan because of the methods and approaches taken in its ELT curricula which were passive vis-à-vis the learner and out of date. Chen was not alone in this belief with noted applied linguistics and other TESOL specialists such as Murphy (2011) stating essentially the same argument.

This paper is grounded in the notion that perhaps methodology is causing this noted lack of return and TTT or Teach/Task-Teach-Teach/Task (Willis and Willis, 2007) is discussed and reviewed in this paper as a way to improve the teaching of EFL speaking at the university level. The process proposed here is characterized by the following traits: 1 – a student-centric approach that best corresponds to what modern linguistics tells us about language; 2 – the establishment and maintenance of a positive affective environment in my classroom; and 3 – a shared learning experience where the teaching and learning are performed by all actors in the learning process. The

position taken by this paper is that the approach presented could help Japanese ELT realize a better return on its investment. Given the ubiquity of EFL programs throughout the Japanese university landscape, the features and aspects of the approach outlined in this discussion could easily be transposed to other areas of Japanese ELT.

Literature Review

In presenting TTT and the features of the proposed implementation, relevant theory and literature is interwoven with my experiences with the approach over my 12-year career as an ELT practitioner and TESOL/AL academic.

TTT and Underpinning SLA Theory

Hegelsen (2001), a prominent voice in Japanese ELT, posited that Japanese EFL students actually had a strong background in lexis and syntax and it was the job of the instructor to start “activating what have because the traditional method of drilling or PPP (present-practice-produce – see Willis and Willis, 2007, for TTT vs. PPP discussion) [was] wasting all they have accomplished” (ibid., paragraph 4). The underlying argument was that university students were ready to use what they know, i.e. be active and productive, and have agency in the language learning process. Essentially, a TTT approach was being suggested.

In my past Asian university EFL speaking classrooms, I would often employ a TTT (test/task – teach – test/task) approach that saw students being active in the beginning of class and my teaching was guided by their performance on this first task which revolved around the lesson’s objective(s). The final task was informed by students’ reaction to my teaching which in turn was governed by their performance relative to the first task. I cannot state that I used TTT all in the time in my teaching of speaking but it was the norm. In these courses which also primarily served Japanese and Korean students, the affective feedback was good with 90%+ satisfaction ratings and positive observed performance on formal assessments suggested effectiveness in terms of proficiency development (Vitta, 2013).

If one subscribes to network/connectionist view of language (see Ellis, 1998 and Schnelle, 2010 as theoretical underpinnings), then this active approach gains additional justification. Having students’ being active from the beginning of class and moving the teacher to a monitor and source of feedback role corresponds well to the view of language at the network level where activation, agency, and engagement as are paramount to the acquisition process which is really the encoding and storing of the target language in the brain. To put it another way, the first task makes the teaching more salient by activating the relevant language networks while also seeing the second task better calibrated to realize production at the appropriate language level to develop the objective(s) driving the lesson, again at the neurological network level. Since this discussion is not staked to one theoretical perspective, it is also pertinent to note that information processing theory supports a TTT implantation. The process of ‘activation,’ as Hegelsen stated it, was in some sense similar to the declarative to procedural knowledge movement phenomenon that is a hallmark of information processing theory in SLA (McLaughlin, 1987). Of note is that McLaughlin’s model, while still leveraging Chomskyan UG and the LAD, saw production as crucial to the proficiency development process. TTT facilitates the processing model by increasing production.

TTT within a Positive Affective Environment

Running alongside of the implementation of TTT is the establishment of an environment of respect, support, and an acceptance of mistakes as the vehicle of improvement. Indeed, this goes hand in hand with the TTT methodology. From the first class, my students have always been informed that they are expected and required to engage in trial and error as a TTT approach requires this. This has usually been model by introducing myself (poorly) in their native language and

display actual joy and comfort as I let the students correct my errors. This is essential in contexts such as Korea and Japan where a highly developed concept of ‘face’ being heavily influenced by Confucianism exists (Shimahara, 2002). In fact, a teacher attempting to implement this position should treat a mocking of errors/mistakes the same way in which he would deal with other major conventional infractions in the classroom while also purposefully modelling errors himself. I have also maintained an open door policy in terms of extra help and support outside of the classroom and this has helped me gain the students’ respect and I am suggesting the same here. This is not to say that I am suggesting a lazy or laid back classroom as high expectations are needed for substantial proficiency development. These high expectations ought to lie, however, within a sea of support and caring where students can feel comfortable in their efforts to become proficient speakers of English.

Sharing Agency with the Students

When I was a NYC Teaching Fellow sitting through our welcoming ceremony, Joel Klein (personal communication, August 15, 2005), the head of the city’s Department of Education, opined that if we did not learn more than we taught, we would have failed in our endeavor. To be sure, the teaching and learning experiences are conjoined in a proper learning environment and the approach I propose, namely TTT, is mindful of this by calling for Japanese students to assume a ‘teaching’ role in the EFL speaking arena. To wit, the students through their production are teaching the instructor how to construct the ‘teach’ and subsequent ‘task/test’ phases every lesson. Additionally, the instructor can assign students the task of designing and leading discussion sessions with the instructor providing support where needed. Since most universities have exchange students, there are opportunities to set up cross-cultural interactions with the Japanese students helping their international guests where English can be used as the medium of instruction. The overriding point is that the approach would be best implemented with students having a hand in what we might label the traditional duties of a teacher that corresponds to the noted ‘flipped classroom’ trend in the field (Lockwood, 2014).

Conclusion

The general premise of this brief position paper has been that a student-centric teaching approach that also takes students’ needs, emotions, and need to engage in the ‘teaching’ process into account would enhance the existing Japanese EFL speaking experience. It is hoped that professionals in this context, and other East Asian settings, use what is proposed here in their classrooms and programs and report their experiences to continue this conversation which has been somewhat ongoing. Finally, it should be noted that I have not based this position on the belief that there are deficiencies within Japanese ELT but rather there is a way to improve ongoing efforts in a professional and dedicated learning environment.

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