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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on Japanese secondary school teachers' embedded challenges and constraints in relation to form-instruction within a TBLT framework. A content analysis of focus group interviews revealed that 1) teachers are most concerned about linguistic form instruction; 2) teachers lack confidence in how to address form-instruction; and 3) teachers strongly believe that inductive type of form instruction is necessary for students to succeed in reading comprehension. The research findings suggest that solid knowledge in not only TBLT but also up-to-date SLA theories and practices may encourage teachers to make informed choices about whether/in what form they would apply TBLT in their teaching contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Task-based Language Teaching has drawn the interest of researchers and educators for several decades in East Asian teaching contexts. Despite the increasing popularity, there has been heated debate over the appropriateness of TBLT in the region. For instance, Littlewood (2007) highlights a concern with the high variation in Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) from “form-focused” to “meaning oriented” (p. 247). Likewise, Goto (2011) refers to these variations as a “weak version” (e.g. task-supported teaching) and a “strong version” (e.g. task-based teaching) (p. 38). This kind of variation seems to have emerged due to diverse constraints embedded in the context of English language teaching in East Asia, such as “conceptual constrains”; “classroom-level constraints”; and “societal-institutional level

constrains” (Goto, 2011, p. 39). Given that constrains will remain for some time, researchers (e.g. Carless, 2007) suggest TBLT in Asian countries could take adjusted forms in a way that culturally situates in respective contexts. At the same time, Carless also reports on secondary teachers’ general preference to PPP (Presentation, Practice, Performance) over TBLT in Hong Kong. In the same vein, Sato (2010) posits the suitability of PPP in the secondary school context in Japan while acknowledging the positive impact of TBLT on learners’ motivation in a performance stage.

As such some researchers have argued that variability in TBLT in practice is to be acknowledged to some extent, yet others suggest that key principles in TBLT should exist. In a seminal book on TBLT, for instance, Van den Branden, Bygate, and Norris (2009) attempt to unify key principles of TBLT and to assemble successful practices in TBLT. Whereas their argument tends to associate with more or less strong versions of TBLT, rather than the seemingly more accepted approach, weak versions (e.g. task-supported teaching) in the East Asian context, the researcher believes that some of the principles they advocate should be applied in East Asian regions to some extent. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the implications of some of these principles and their feasibility in the context of secondary school education in Japan. To address this issue, three core principles and investigated secondary school teachers’ reactions to these principles were selected. Given the findings from the literature, teachers’ negative reactions had been anticipated. However, the purpose of the original study is to explore more in depth of voices of teachers. As a part of this bigger project, the current paper partially reports on 1) which principles drew teachers’ interests and arguments the most; 2) what kind of challenges and constrains teachers illustrated in implementing TBLT.

2. METHOD

In order to gain valid voices of teachers, this study was designed to enroll secondary school teachers in a one-day workshop on TBLT to fully inform them of basic principles on TBLT. For the convenience of teachers, the workshop was delivered twice on two respective days. The procedure was as follows:

- Part 1: A one hour presentation of TBLT as it is related to syllabus design, grammar, and assessment
- Part 2: A one hour practicum where teachers would be invited to share their ideas about TBLT and apply what they have learned in Part 1
- Part 3: A one hour focus group discussion for participants to reflect on TBLT in light of their workshop experience
- Part 4: A post-workshop survey by email

Participants of the study voluntarily attended the workshop. The advertisement of the workshop was distributed to in-service teachers who previously participated in a teacher-training workshops and a conference on TBLT. Six secondary school teachers (two junior high school teachers; two senior high school teachers; one integrated junior and high school teacher) contacted the researcher and agreed to participate in this study. The pre-survey revealed that all of the six participants were initially interested in learning about and conducting TBLT. The results also showed that the participants have diverse lengths of teaching experience, ranging from four months to twenty-five years. Similarly, the level of engagement in TBLT differed from being a “TBLT” curriculum developer, to having regularly applied tasks in a Super English Language High School (SELHi) project, to having heard about TBLT but never put it into practice.

2.1. Part 1

In Part 1, my colleague presented the three guiding principles utilizing concrete examples of TBLT implementation. The presentation was conducted in English, being the primary language of the presenter. Three basic TBLT principles were selected to be the focus of inquiry: 1) TBLT is a syllabus design approach; 2) Grammar instruction deductively happens in TBLT; 3) Task-Based Language Assessment (TBLA) ought to be an element of TBLT.

Far from serving as a complete understanding of TBLT, the sessions were meant to serve as an accessible but comprehensive starting point for participants to hold discussions on TBLT practice in Japan. For the purpose of this paper, the researcher will only describe the content related to principle 2 in the following section since this principle seems to have drawn the most interests of the teachers.

2.2. The role of grammar instruction in TBLT

TBLT embraces “experiential learning” (Dewey, 1933) that argues learning happens through an individual learner’s experiences, and therefore in a learner specific order and pace, whereas synthetic/ structural syllabus approaches evolved from the notion that knowledge can be learned in a pre-described sequence and pace. Therefore, interpretations of TBLT that attempt to blend tasks along with rigid grammar teaching approaches are problematic, in that as long as teachers set the ultimate goal of a task as the immediate acquiring of some target grammar element, the approach is dependent on an artificial and forcibly quickened schedule of grammar acquisition. However, this does not mean that TBLT ignores the importance of or the need for grammar as a factor in language instruction completely. Approaches to grammar teaching that account for learners’ needs to progress from using simpler to more complex

forms in a gradual, less rigidly defined manner are embraced. They also emphasize the acquisition of new forms, in the sense of an ability and willingness to use them, as opposed to simply recognizing them (see Smith, 1993; Ellis, 2005; Bygate, 2001; Bygate & Samuda, 2005; Long & Robinson, 1998; Samuda, 2001 to learn more). Looking at practices, almost no “TBLT” implementations published in the Japanese EFL context fully encompass these elements. Researchers and practitioners tend to have prerequisite target linguistic forms in designing classes no matter how consciously they are doing so.

2.3. Part 2

In part 2, teachers discussed their localized “TBLT” teaching practices with handouts that they had been asked to bring to the workshop. This phase was intended as an opportunity for teachers to clarify the contents of the presentation phase and reflect on their own classroom practices in the context of what they had learned. As interaction between the presenter and the teachers was an integral component to the discussions, this part was also conducted in English.

2.4. Part 3

In this phase, focus group discussions were carried out, and analyzed using a content analysis approach (c.f. Morgan, 2002). Broadly speaking, focus group data collection is an interview technique involving multiple members collectively focusing on a topic which is related to the participants’ interests and experiences (Wilkinson, 2008). This study employed focus groups under the expectation that interaction between the participants would unveil unexpected teachers’ insights (Morgan, 1997). In the focus group, the group members freely discussed the three guiding principles without being given any specific questions and instructions. The focus group discussions were audio-recorded, and being listened by the

researcher. Then, the salient themes of the discussions were listed and labeled for each group by the researcher. Then, each time participants discussed a particular was counted, and the duration of each mention was timed. In a case where participants discussed two themes, the mention was counted for both themes, and the duration of time was equally divided into two. After the overall picture of the discussion had been captured, teachers’ utterances related to the three guiding principles were closely investigated so as to understand their deeper insights.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. Analysis of the workshop discussions

Figure 1 shows the percentage of how long each theme was discussed in the two discussion groups.

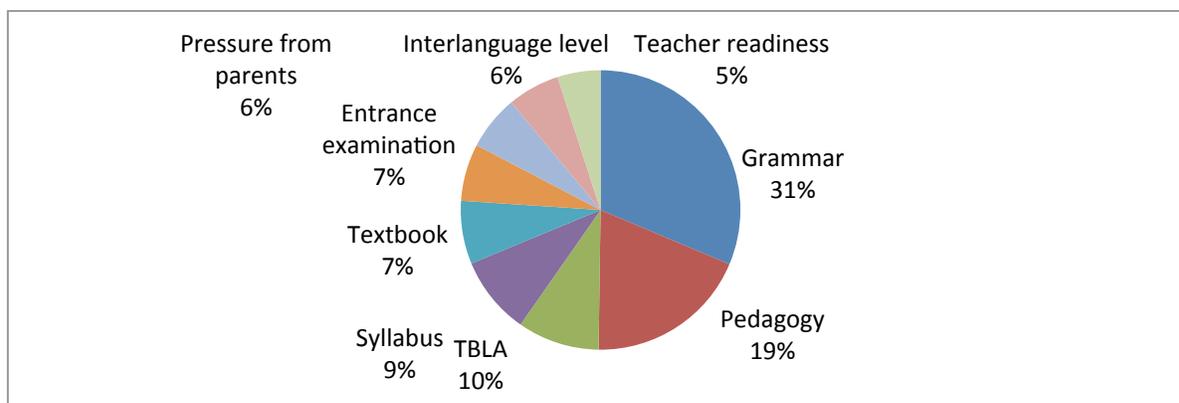


Figure. 1. Themes discussed in groups

The most discussed theme was grammar (31%). This includes how to address form instruction. The second most discussed theme was pedagogy (19%). This encompasses classroom management, setting a time limit for task completion, and task complexity. Given that it might be premature to claim that the most discussed topic was the most impacted, this

is at least evident that teachers are concerned about grammar to a large extent. On the other hand, it is also intriguing that teachers extensively discussed practical matters, pedagogy (mainly how to operate tasks in class), even though it was not a part of the guiding principles. According to the results, teachers seem mostly concerned with what they can do in classroom teaching (50%). In other words, they might feel more in control of teaching practices rather than syllabus design and TBLA which often involve other stakeholders.

In order to further explore the most impacted principle, grammar, the parts which strongly connect with the theme were transcribed and translated into English by the researcher. In the next section, I will discuss what is challenges and constrains of teachers related to grammar instruction within a TBLT framework.

3.2. Evidenced challenges and constraints in relation to linguistic form instruction

It is evident from the initial analysis that teachers are most concerned about how to address form instruction in a TBLT framework. All teachers expressed their lack of confidence in particular, and to what extent and at which timing they should offer grammar instruction. The problems seem fairly complex due to multiple factors influencing their teaching practices, such as class-management, pressure of high-stakes entrance examinations, and misconceptions that form-instruction cannot happen in TBLT, which correspond with previous findings (c.f. Carless, 2007). Nakatsu (pseudonym) hinted her uncertainty toward form-instruction in TBLT in the following excerpt. She mentioned:

I guess there are students who notice from a lot of linguistic input. Like, this word equals to this meaning, and there might be students who use dictionaries as an aid to understand the input. However, there might be students who have difficulties doing so.

So, I think it is also very good to give form-related feedback, but certain times explicit knowledge helps...

This quote may indicate her dilemma between her wish to have students engage in a task without explicit presentation of the target form and her anxiety that not all students perfectly perform in the task. She sounds unsure how much and in which stage she could provide explicit linguistic input to students within a TBLT framework. This might indicate that she cannot completely be away from a PPP framework in which learners are fully equipped with the target linguistic elements before task-engagement.

Nakatsu's following account further suggests she needs more extensive training to successfully facilitate a task.

At least when I was taking English lessons in XXX, I mean, I have experienced TBLT as a freshman student, but it was TBLT lesson where students tried to manage tasks based on the knowledge learned in junior and senior high school, right? Even though I tried tasks in junior high school with that experience, saying like "let's do it", there is nothing they can output out of nothing.

Even though Nakatsu claimed to have learned TBLT in a class in a teachers' training course, it seems difficult for her to embrace the situation where students are not fully equipped with target linguistic elements needed to complete a task. It might illustrate the pressure which she might feel to teach the target grammar forms presented in the authorized textbooks, but this

also suggests that teachers might assume that linguistic forms need to be inductively taught for students to remember them.

Another challenge identified was the pressure from high-stakes examinations by which teachers strongly feel grammar should be mainly taught in class and their misconception of tasks being as oral activities. Furukawa (pseudonym), who had been involved in a SELHi project, expressed his struggles as follows:

I guess if authorized textbooks change, the condition might change, but ultimately it is the Center Examination in Japan. About 250 students in our school take the examination, and for them what's asked in the exam counts everything. In other words, the style of the exam decides everything. As Researcher B mentioned, it is true that listening components have been incorporated to increase the questions related to conversation by 30 to 40 percent, but if it comes to question 6, reading long passages, unless we enhance students' vocabulary, grammar and syntax in class to read long passages, even though we are delivering communicative lessons just for fun, unless they can get scores at the Center exam, like 120 or 140 scores, the score they target to pass their target universities...Anyway, I was discussing with Terui during lunchtime, the more students start to go to cram schools, the more we deliver this type of lesson...

This quote hints that Furukawa misconceptualizes that any communicative way of teaching does not include form instruction or reading instruction. His reference, "*communicative lessons just for fun*," could indicate that he understands tasks as oral activities rather than teaching practices to enhance students' holistic academic competence of English. He

attributes the reasons why it was difficult to implement communicative type English teaching (which he claims as TBLT) to the Center Examination which includes reading comprehension questions based on long reading passages. This suggests that teachers' misconceptions that tasks cannot be utilized to enhance reading ability have negatively influenced the teachers' decisions toward adopting tasks. Furthermore, it also hints that introducing tasks incorporating reading and better guidance on how to address linguistic form instruction, such as FonF may have an impact on teachers' willingness to implement TBLT.

Based on the data analysis, there was emerging evidence suggesting that teachers need more training in better manipulating principle 2 in tasks and in better facilitating reading in tasks. It was revealed that teachers are likely to adhere to inductive ways of grammar instruction because teachers are not informed enough of ways to address deductive grammar instruction in a TBLT framework. In particular, understanding the timing and the extent of form instruction was expressed as challenges by teachers in focus group discussions. Other things becoming apparent were that enhancing reading comprehension skills is one of the major concerns for the high-stakes examinations and that teachers strongly believe that grammar input is the most appropriate way to enhance reading comprehension ability. If teachers are introduced to up-to date SLA theories and practices to better foster reading comprehension skills, it might provide alternative perspectives to tasks. In other words, teachers' better understanding of SLA might open up possibilities to better understand TBLT. Thus, extensive teacher trainings in light of TBLT and SLA could encourage teachers to incorporate principle 2 into their teaching practices in secondary school settings in Japan.

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated a group of Japanese teachers' perceptions, challenges and constraints in relation to TBLT. Teachers' in-depth voices suggested that 1) teachers are most concerned about grammar instruction; 2) teachers feel their limited understanding of how to effectively facilitate tasks in terms of form-instruction; 3) teachers believe that inductive grammar instruction is necessary to succeed in better comprehending reading texts in high-stakes examinations. With better understanding the ways to facilitate form-instruction in tasks and expanding teachers' repertoires of enhancing reading comprehension skills, there would be a possibility that the principle 2 could be successfully adopted in secondary school contexts. However, the researcher acknowledges the limitation that this discussion makes less impact without encompassing societal constraints, such as assessment at the school level and the exam system in Japan (Goto, 2011). Since this paper is limited in scope, I did not expand the discussion to the institutional level. At the same time, the researcher is aware that the proposed suggestions to overcome the challenges also make less sense without remedying the societal constraints. Yet, these grass-root level changes could make an impact to some extent because teachers are the locus of making changes in designing and delivering English classes. Indeed, it is hoped that the findings of this study, embedded constraints and challenges of secondary school teachers, could help to shape globalized forms of TBLT in the context of Japan.

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