



The Socio-Cultural Suitability of Task-based Instruction in Japan: Through the Lens of Learners

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This article reports the findings of an action research project, which investigated how university students would respond to Task-based Instruction (TBI), with the primary aim to examine its socio-cultural appropriateness in the Japanese EFL context. The study employed a hybrid form of task-based and textbook-focused instruction in English classes at the tertiary level. A survey was administered to collect student feedback, which was examined qualitatively using thematic analysis. The analysis revealed that a majority of students positively viewed TBI in terms of main themes that emerged from the data: Social Skills Building; Personal Development; Future Usefulness, with English Learning as a common sub-theme. Pedagogical implications, as well as suggestions for further research, are discussed based on these findings.

Keywords: Task-based instruction, Japanese EFL context, learner-centered approach, English education

Introduction

Since its emergence in the late 1980's, Task-based Instruction (TBI), or Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), has been implemented in second and foreign language classrooms worldwide, gaining support from instructors who seek innovative ways to engage students in language learning (East, 2015; Nunan, 2004; Willis & Willis, 2009). In Asian EFL contexts, an increasing number of educators have been advocating its benefits over the past few decades in response to the pressing needs to help learners foster functional English proficiency to succeed in today's globalised world (e.g., Carless, 2004, 2007; Cutrone & Beh, 2018; Harris, 2018; Littlewood, 2007).

Having its root in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), TBI is characterised as a learner-centered approach that encourages student interaction through meaningful, goal-oriented and real-life tasks (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Willis & Willis, 2009). Supported by research findings in the field of SLA (Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996), TBI is constructed around several theoretical backgrounds, viewing language learning and teaching from the psycholinguistic perspective; the cognitive-interactionist perspective; and the socio-cultural perspective (Ellis et al., 2019; Skehan, 2003). As TBI essentially highlights the importance of the collaborative nature of interactions for language learning, the concepts of socio-cultural theory play a critical role in the principles of TBI (Ellis, 2003; Ellis et al., 2019; Feryok, 2017). Employing TBI in language classes is therefore said to have several pedagogical advantages; that learners would improve their communication skills, gain confidence, become autonomous learners, and consequently, develop a deeper understanding of the language (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 1998; Willis & Willis, 2009). Over years, a growing body of research has empirically reported improved



English linguistic competence in learners (e.g., Cutrone & Beh, 2018; Ellis, 2005; Rost, 2002; Sarani & Sahebi, 2012; Yildiz & Senel, 2017).

Despite its popularity and pedagogical advantages, the implementation of TBI in actual classrooms has seen challenges or resistance, often stemming from conflicting beliefs and values that each stakeholder holds (Carless, 2004; Ducker, 2012; Ellis; 2009; Harris, 2018; Leeming et al., 2020). Particularly in some Asian contexts, including Japan, in which a conventional, teacher-centred approach still takes precedence (Harris, 2018; Stroud, 2013), its suitability has regularly been questioned (Burrows, 2008; Hu, 2005; Miyasako, 2011; Sato, 2009, 2010). Deeply embedded in each social context, issues concerning TBI's suitability seem to be quite diverse, but they may roughly be organised into two broad streams: pedagogical concerns and socio-cultural concerns. In the following section, some of the key issues addressed in the literature are described.

Literature Review

Pedagogical Concerns: PPP vs. TBI Debate

Pedagogical concerns about TBI have generally been raised in comparison with conventional, teacher-centred instruction models, such as Present-Practice-Produce (PPP), which have been the mainstream teaching practice in many educational contexts since the 1970s (Anderson, 2016; Carless, 2007, 2009; Skehan, 1988). In PPP, learners are explicitly presented with discrete language forms (Present), practice them through repetitive drills (Practice), and then use the language for spontaneous, unscripted production (Produce). Centring on the notion that practice makes perfect (Anderson, 2016; Carless, 2009), PPP presumes that “knowledge becomes skill through successive practice and that language is learned in small chunks leading to the whole” (Maftoon & Sarem, 2015, p. 31). As such, accuracy is prioritised over fluency, with the focus being on product, rather than the process of learning (Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 1998). Teaching mainly involves explicit explanations of grammar rules and vocabulary in isolation, over which the teacher has absolute control (Skehan, 1998).

Critics of TBI often argue that TBI lacks this explicit focus-on form(s) instruction, therefore encourages poor L2 production, which leads to fossilisation in learners' L2 (Miyasako, 2011; Sato, 2009; Swan, 2005, as cited in Ellis, 2009). This type of concern appears consistent across Asian contexts where a society places an emphasis on passing high-stakes entrance exams (Carless, 2007), and consequently, the focus of language instruction centres on the teaching of “test-taking strategies” (Hatipoğlu, 2016, p. 138).

Japan is no exception. From the start of junior high school, passing exams becomes the focus of most students (Sato, 2009). The teaching is mostly done in a teacher-centred fashion, predominantly through grammar-translation (Reed, 2020; Schneider & Mecha, 2018) or PPP (Miyasako, 2011; Sato, 2009, 2010). In support of PPP over TBI in the Japanese context, Sato (2009, 2010) points to the gap that exists between the immediate needs of students and the principles of TBI (e.g., meaning-focused communication), asserting that the conventional approach is most suited as long as “the passing of knowledge-based exams continues to be the primary objective for many students” (Sato, 2009, p. 11).

It is critically important to recognise, however, that in most cases, the PPP model used in Japanese teaching contexts appears somewhat different from how PPP is generally understood; it would typically focus on the first two stages (Present and Practice), often leaving out the third stage (Produce) in which free L2 production activities are to be performed (Kotaka, 2013; Miyasako, 2011; Sato, 2010; Takashima, 2011). The omission of the last stage appears due to time-related constraints, such as limited class time and tight syllabuses and school curricula (Kotaka, 2013; Sato, 2010), and to make up for the loss of the third stage, the grammar items introduced and practiced during the first- and second stages may be repeated or tested for accuracy.

TBI's feasibility in the Japanese context is also questioned in terms of its linguistic environment (EFL) where there is little exposure to authentic language use outside the classroom (Burrows, 2008; Butler,

2011; Miyasako, 2011; Sato, 2009, 2010). Critics argue that TBI, which relies on the learning of information in an incidental manner (Ellis, 2003), is not suitable in the Japanese context because its environment does not offer sufficient implicit learning opportunities for noticing to occur (Butler, 2017; Miyasako, 2011; Sato, 2009). When noticing is not expected, the critics argue that TBI would rather adversely affect learners' L2 acquisition because improper use of forms would likely go unnoticed (Burrows, 2008; Miyasako, 2011; Sato, 2009; Swan, 2005).

Socio-cultural Perspective

Socio-cultural concerns generally refer to issues or challenges arising from a clash between the characteristics of TBI and traditional educational values of Asian societies (Carless, 2007; Ducker, 2012; Harris, 2018; Leeming et al., 2020). It is often argued that TBI, an approach developed in the West, is not culturally appropriate since it would conflict with the cultural norms practiced in Asia where learners are typically passive and the teacher is expected to play an authoritative role in the classroom (Burrows, 2008; Carless, 2004; McVeigh, 2001; Nakane & Ellwood, 2009; Robinson, 1998; Sato, 2009; Wicking, 2009, as cited in Harris, 2018). In typical Japanese classrooms, for example, it has rather been known that students seldom speak up or offer their opinions out of a fear of making mistakes in front of others (Burrows, 2008; Littlewood, 2007; Robinson, 1998; Stroud, 2013). Further, Burrows (2008), citing some failed cases of TBI, asserts that "Japanese students' cognitive processing style" does not meet pedagogical expectations rendered by Western approaches (p.16).

Based on these premises, critics warn that the use of a learner-centred approach, like TBI, would rather cause unease, confusion, tension, and stress on the part of the learner, as it ultimately requires them to change their learning behaviours, which would then negatively affect students' overall learning experiences (Burrows, 2008; Butler, 2011; Carless, 2004; Ducker, 2012; Hu, 2005, as cited in Harris, 2018; Littlewood, 2007; Sato, 2009, 2010).

In response to this dilemma, researchers have been advocating more context-appropriate approaches, such as Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT) - a weak version of TBI (Ellis, 2003), a hybrid model of TBI and PPP (Klapper, 2003, as cited in Long 2016), and a 'situated task-based approach' by Carless (2007) in which "culture, setting and teachers' existing beliefs, values and practices" are integrated with the principles of task-based teaching (p. 605). In principle, all of these would be using "a framework whereby tasks would still be central" (East, 2015, p. 6) while ensuring that more scaffolding is in place to prepare students for the idea of TBI (Ellis, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

This paper has so far briefly reviewed some of the contextual issues raised in the literature, particularly pertaining to the cultural suitability of a task-based approach in Asian classrooms. While these issues are crucial to consider, much of the discussion seems to have centred on the views of theorists and teachers, failing to acknowledge the perspectives of learners. That is, the arguments have typically been theoretical in nature, or made mainly from the perspectives of teachers, which appear based on teachers' own personal preferences and learning experiences (Carless, 2009; Harris, 2018; Littlewood, 2007). This is problematic as they may not necessarily represent a balanced perspective to label TBI as socio-culturally unsuitable for learners in the Asian context, particularly when they have rarely had a chance to experience it themselves. What seems to be missing is, to the best knowledge of the author of this paper, a discussion involving learners' voices through their actual experiences with TBI. With TBI being a learner-centred approach, incorporating evidence-based learner's perspectives into the discussion is deemed equally important, and it is this particular point to which this research aims to contribute.

This action research study investigates learners' perceptions of TBI, with the main focus to explore its socio-cultural appropriateness in the Japanese EFL context. Specifically, it employs a hybrid form of task-

based and textbook-focused instruction in university English classes, and examines student feedback using thematic analysis. While this action research uses a weaker version of TBI at the tertiary level, its primary interest remains to investigate how learners respond to a learner-centred approach to language learning and seek possible solutions for the implementation of TBI in wider teaching contexts in Japan.

To achieve these objectives, this study has set forth the following research questions:

1. How do students respond to TBI?
2. What are the impacts of TBI on students' views towards learning?

The next section begins by outlining the methodological framework employed in the present study. It is then followed by a presentation of findings and then discussion. It concludes with implications drawn from this study, and lastly future research suggestions are discussed.

Methodology

Descriptions of the Action Research

This action research study was carried out during two separate semesters in 2019 at a private university in Japan. The course chosen for this study was one of the inter-departmental, mandatory English courses (preparation for English proficiency tests) designed mainly for first- and second-year students. In each semester, different groups of students participated in the study. The classes were essentially conducted in English. Japanese was allowed for discussions amongst participants to encourage greater student interaction and increase the chance for profound learning. However, English was the default language for reporting and communicating with the instructor.

Participants

In the first semester, this study was carried out with two classes of non-English majors (N = 67). Both classes were first-year students. In the second semester, four classes of non-English majors participated (N = 160). Two classes were first-year students (N = 64), another with second-year students (N = 51), and the last class was a group of third-year students (N = 45). For both the first- and second semesters, each class had students of mixed English proficiency levels.

Design of Hybrid Model

This study adopted a hybrid approach of 1) textbook-focused and 2) task-based instruction. Approximately the first two-thirds of the 15-week course were allocated for textbook-focused instruction, and the last third (five weeks) was devoted to doing sequencing tasks, including pre- and post-task phases of the framework. An overview of the course structure is described in the following:

Textbook-focused portion of the course

The textbook used for the course included a variety of themes, such as daily life, jobs, finances and travel. Each unit starts with theme-based vocabulary, followed by listening and reading exercises that are formatted to a popular English proficiency test often used in Japan. Units containing themes relevant to the planned tasks were particularly covered in class. From the seventh week onward, the last 15-20 minutes of each 90-minute class time was allocated for brainstorming and scaffolding activities where the students performed relevant activities to the actual tasks.

Task-based instruction portion of the course

1st-semester, 2019 (pair work). Using authentic materials available online, such as retail flyers and apartment rental listings, students worked in pairs to complete four sequencing tasks (Figure 1) under the title of ‘Furnishing an Apartment on a Budget’. For this project, they each pretended to be a student in Vancouver, Canada and would rent a two-bedroom apartment with a friend (project partner) on the condition that each had a budget of C\$2,000 to spend for the first month. In addition to understanding the lease conditions, each pair was to furnish the suite by purchasing furniture or household items from local stores (retail flyers). In order to control the processes and task outcomes, some conditions, such as the rental property, were pre-determined by the instructor. The sequencing tasks were performed over a 2-week period and students were assigned homework each week (e.g., making a shopping list, comprehending the lease conditions) in preparation for the actual tasks. Each task was performed with a time limit (10 - 15 minutes) in class following pre-task activities, such as strategy planning and brainstorming, which were also done in limited time. Upon completion, oral reporting was conducted in pairs as part of post-task activity. The assessment of oral reporting was peer-reviewed. In the week that followed, the instructor’s feedback was given to the whole class.

2nd semester, 2019 (group work). The series of tasks implemented in the first semester were reiterated for the second semester with some modifications. The main differences from the first semester were that the tasks were performed in groups, instead of in pairs, and a speaking component (Task 4) was added to the task list.

Furnishing an Apartment on a Budget

1st-semester - Task Sequencing	
Pre-task:	Making a shopping list (for your own room)
Task 1.	Write an email response to the property manager
Task 2.	Apartment quizzes
Task 3.	Make a shopping list (with prices and store names)
Task 4.	Make a balance sheet (for the first month)
Post-task:	Oral reporting / Peer review / Teacher feedback
2nd-semester - Task Sequencing	
Pre-task:	Making a shopping list (for your own room)
Task 1.	Write an email response to the property manager
Task 2.	Make a budget plan for the first month
Task 3.	Make a shopping list & a balance sheet
Task 4.	Leave a phone message to the property manager
Post-task:	Oral reporting / Peer review / Teacher feedback

Figure 1. Design of task sequencing.

Data Collection

An online survey was administered to collect student feedback. It consisted of two parts: the first part asked about students’ past experiences of English learning and the second one being about the current project (see Appendix). The questions contained a mixture of multiple choice- and open-ended questions. While quantitative results may be presented, this article mainly uses text data obtained from the last open-ended question (Part 2) to which the students were invited to openly share comments about their TBI learning experiences. Results from other questions, as well as the author’s field notes, may also be referred to where relevant.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to the survey, the students were informed of its purpose, and that participation was voluntary and anonymous. They were then asked to give consent to proceed; 220 students out of 244 who registered in the courses participated in the survey. The questionnaire and student comments were originally written in Japanese (unless indicated otherwise), and were translated into English by the author for the purpose of this paper.

Analytical Method

Text data obtained from the open-ended questions in the survey was examined qualitatively using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method for identifying themes found within data. Looking beyond what has been said or written in the data, the goal of a thematic analysis is "to identify themes, i.e., patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue" by distinguishing between 'semantic' and 'latent' levels of meaning (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3353).

Since this study was concerned with exploring beyond students' 'likes' and 'dislikes' about the approach, this analytical method was deemed appropriate. Drawing on Braun & Clarke's six-step process (see Braun & Clarke, 2006 for details) to approach qualitative data, student comments were coded manually and analysed to generate themes. For coding, this study used an open coding method where codes were not pre-set but developed while working through the coding process (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). At the initial stage of coding, text mining software (KH Coder Version 3. by Koichi Higuchi) was used to extract word groups and search for patterns in the data.

Results and Analysis

Part 1: About Students' Past Experiences in English Classes

Figure 2 shows the results of Q1, which asked about students' prior experiences with English classes. In Table 1 that follows, the description of question items is provided. With the items 4 and 5 denoting traditional teaching styles being most reported, it is reasonable to assume that for most students, their previous experiences with English learning mainly involved teacher-centered, grammar-focus instruction.

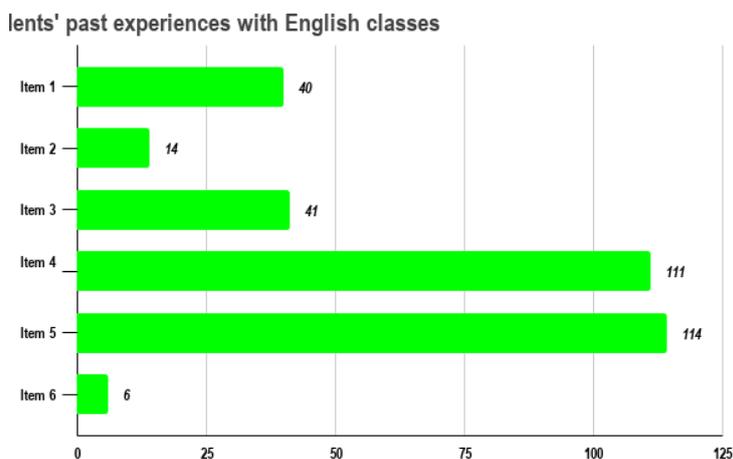


Figure 2. Students' previous experiences with English classes.

TABLE 1
Description of Question Items (Check all that apply)

		N
Item 1	Students work in pairs or groups to do questions in the textbook.	40
Item 2	Students work in pairs or groups to do research, project work.	14
Item 3	The teacher explains grammar rules and vocabulary to the class and students work in pairs or groups to do questions in the textbook.	41
Item 4	The teacher explains grammar rules and vocabulary first and students work on their own and take tests to check for comprehension.	111
Item 5	Students work on their own to do questions in the textbook and the teacher explains the answer afterwards.	114
Item 6	Other	6

In the meantime, the second question in Part 1 asked about their experience with a similar project in English classes before. The data revealed that 87.4% (N = 195 out of 223, 1st- and 2nd-semester combined) responded ‘No’, indicating that the majority has no previous experience with TBI or a similar approach to English learning.

Part 2: About the Project

This section presents qualitative results. For both the 1st- and 2nd-semesters, students’ responses to the project were significantly positive, with most referring to the benefits that they perceived about task-based learning. While positive views were the majority, some concerns were also expressed. In the following, themes generated from the data will first be presented, and then each theme will be described and analysed in more detail, together with some representative comments to illustrate each point of view.

Emerging themes

A qualitative text analysis revealed that there was an overarching theme: ‘The Opportunity for Self-reflection’, and under which, three main themes emerged: Social Skills Building (The value of collaborative learning); Personal Development (Self-awareness); Future Usefulness (Real-life relevance). Further, English Learning (Skills and knowledge) was also identified as a sub-theme common to each theme. Figure 3 is a thematic map illustrating the themes and how they interconnect with each other.

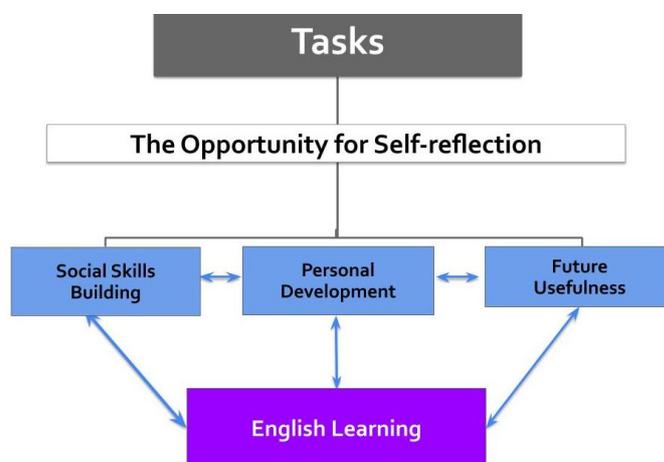


Figure 3. Thematic map of student perceptions of TBI.

Theme 1. Social skills building: The value of collaborative learning. This theme articulates the impact of TBI on students’ views in terms of social skills development, such as collaborative, interpersonal and communication skills. An overwhelming majority of the students highlighted the value

of collaborative learning in their comments, elaborating how working with their peer(s) on the project had helped them foster or improve their interpersonal/communication skills. To illustrate, some commented that they learned to 'speak up' during group work while listening to others, or learned how to be efficient in group work situations. Many of them mentioned that they realised the importance of 'discussion' and 'sharing ideas' with others for learning. There were also a number of students who said that they were able to complete the tasks only because of team efforts. The author's field notes also confirm that negotiation of meaning, such as asking for clarification, was frequently observed during the process.

Equally important, students were also clear about challenges or difficulties they faced during collaborative work. The tasks inevitably required them to strike a balance between respecting others' opinions and asserting one's own, which appeared challenging for many. What is worth noting is that many of these challenges were expressed in conjunction with contrasting words, such as 'but' and 'although', nuancing that once they had overcome such difficulties, challenges associated with team collaboration appeared to turn into a sense of responsibility, accomplishment, satisfaction, or confidence in the end. Some illustrative quotes are as follows. *An abbreviation in the brackets (Smr) denotes 'semester'.

It was quite challenging as we had to do everything ourselves from doing research to writing in English to giving a presentation at the end. But it gave a sense of satisfaction when we finished as we worked together and were able to achieve the goal. (Smr1 Student 32)

The tasks were too challenging for me to handle on my own, but by working together with my friends I was able to achieve a goal, which gave me a sense of accomplishment. I think I gradually learned new vocabulary as well. I couldn't have done it alone, but because of group work, I feel that not only did I enjoy learning English, I also learned the practical aspects of the English language. (Smr2 Student 67)

I think this style of learning was quite efficient as it allowed us to confirm our comprehension if there was anything unclear about the project. I also developed an ability to speak up in my group. It was a practical and good experience for me. (Smr2 Student 81)

If somebody is missing in the group, it would burden the rest of the members. So I realised that I would need to be responsible myself and do my part well. Discussions with my peers helped me focus on the project in an enjoyable way. (Smr2 Student 98)

Challenges arising from team dynamics. While numerous students valued collaboration for learning, the analysis revealed that there was a notable difference in student comments between the 1st- and 2nd semesters in terms of collaboration challenges. That is, there seemed to be more students in the 2nd semester articulating teamwork problems than those in the 1st semester. Given that there was a difference in team formation between the 1st- (pairs) and 2nd semesters (groups), these issues seemed to stem from the complex nature of team dynamics, particularly for some groups consisting of individuals who were not close friends. In a pair work setting, students can easily pair up with someone they feel comfortable with. To form a group of four, however, a group may consist of two pairs of close friends, or of four individuals who have not known each other well. This might have caused a different magnitude of member involvement in group work, perhaps affecting how they performed and perceived the tasks.

Group work was a little challenging as the level of each member's motivation was not the same. (Smr2 Student 66)

I was annoyed by some member(s) who skipped classes as it caused a lot of trouble for the rest of us. (Smr2 Student 87)

Theme 2. Personal development: Self-awareness. Closely related to the overarching theme (The Opportunity for Self-reflection), a second theme highlights the impact of the project on students' personal development as a learner. It suggests that through this experience the participants had an opportunity to look back on their own learning and realised the importance of being responsible for themselves. As demonstrated in the following quotes, the students evaluated themselves in terms of their own task performance, attitudes towards learning in general, and then identified areas for improvements and personal growth. The terms 'proactive' and 'self-directing' together with 'must' or 'need' were commonly used in relation to 'realisation' for future learning.

The project required us to use our English knowledge to accomplish the goals, which made me realise that I had not studied hard enough in the past. I now know that university English is different from that in high school and realised I need to adapt. (Smr1 Student 18)

I thought it was important to take initiative in group work, not just leaving the job to the others. I now know that if everybody actively participates, we as a group can achieve better results, so I would like to make use of this experience in the future. (Smr2 Student 73)

It was hard for me to write or do things in English as I am not good at English. I know I have been reluctant to speak up in class because of my poor English, but I would like to be more proactive from now on so I can contribute in class. (Smr2 Student 83)

Theme 3. Future usefulness: Real-world relevance. A third theme represents how the participants perceived the tasks in terms of relevance. A number of students voiced that the tasks had practical, real-world applications, which many found useful. While what each person considered beneficial somewhat differed (i.e., learning new vocabulary, honing email writing skills or gaining cultural knowledge), the tasks resembling real-world situations, enhanced by the use of authentic materials, appeared to have had a strong impact on their perceptions of English learning.

I learned the subtle differences in commodity prices that exist between Japan and overseas in a realistic way. (Smr1 Student 24)

We had to plan a budget for this project, which I thought was quite useful because I learned not only cultural differences between Japan and Canada, but also how to be financially responsible. (Smr1 Student 43)

Common Sub-theme. English learning: skills and knowledge. 'English learning' was identified as a common sub-theme among the three main themes, suggesting that there was a close relationship between each theme and English learning or self-reported gains on English competence. To illustrate, students reported that their English skills or knowledge improved either because of collaborative work (Theme 1), or taking ownership of their own learning (Theme 2), or doing tasks that had real-world applications (Theme 3). Related to Theme 3, in particular, the use of online materials appeared the largest contributor to their perceptions of increased linguistic competence. As seen in the following quotes, some provided elaborative explanations as to how it helped improve their English knowledge or skills, perhaps boosting their confidence at the same time.

I was able to learn practical English through the use of rental listings that exist for real. (Smr1 Student 59)

I think I can learn English more effectively this way than in a usual lecture-type lesson. (Smr2 Student 137)

I used to memorise words in isolation, but I was able to learn vocabulary in context and from similar expressions. (Smr2 Q2 Student 139)

Student Concerns and Issues Related to TBI

While the majority responded positively to TBI, some concerns were also expressed. In the order of frequency, common concerns found in the data are listed below.

1. English as the medium of instruction
2. Time pressure
3. Challenges associated with teamwork (2nd semester in particular)
4. Preference for textbook-focused lessons

The most frequently-mentioned issue was related to English as the medium of instruction. Most referred to insufficient use of the L1 by the instructor in explaining the tasks or how to use the online materials. This type of concern was addressed in conjunction with a set of words, such as ‘anxious’ and ‘difficult (to understand)’. Comments like “I want the teacher to use Japanese” (Smr2 Student 88) were typical in this category.

There were many areas (of the project) that were difficult to understand as the instructions were not in Japanese. I would have liked it if the key points were explained in Japanese. (Smr2 Student 74)

The issue of ‘time pressure’ was another concern, which could partly be related to the difficulty in following the teacher’s instruction in English (see Smr1 Student 21).

I found doing the tasks within a limited time very hard as I am not used to English instructions. (Smr1 Student 21)

There were times when our outcomes were not satisfactory because we had insufficient time for discussions. (Smr2 Student 60)

While English being a Medium of Instruction (EMI) and time pressure were seen as problematic to some students, these issues may not necessarily be concerned directly with the efficacy or socio-cultural appropriateness of TBI; but rather, they may reflect learners’ lack of experiences with EMI, in addition to output activities in the past. The third issue, collaboration challenges related to team dynamics, has already been addressed in the earlier part in this section (Theme 1). Whether it is pair- or group work, team dynamics would affect how students perform tasks and perceive task-based learning. Lastly, there were some comments showing a preference towards conventional, textbook-focused instruction (presumably learning test-taking techniques).

(I do not think I learned anything new) because we didn’t do TOEIC-related work in the later part of the course. (Smr2 Q2 Student 112)

I thought the difficulty of English in this class was too easy. I wish I would’ve gotten more difficult English. (Smr2 Student 154: in original)

Though very few, these concerns would reflect students’ past learning styles, which may have affected how they viewed the project, hence TBI. As this is relevant to the main interest of this research, it will be addressed in the following section.

Discussion

The primary concern of this action research was to investigate learners' perceptions of TBI through its weaker form, with the aim to explore its socio-cultural appropriateness in the Japanese EFL context. The following research questions were set out to answer:

1. How do students respond to TBI?
2. What are the impacts of TBI on students' views towards learning?

Overall, student responses were considerably positive. While what each student perceived as beneficial varied, TBI particularly had an impact on three themes that emerged from the data: Social Skills Building; Personal Development; and Future Usefulness. In addition to these main themes, English Learning was also identified as a common sub-theme. All of these themes would represent student perceptions of TBI, therefore providing answers to both research question 1 and 2, which will be discussed in the following.

First and foremost, TBI had the utmost impact on student perceptions towards collaborative learning (Theme 1). The data revealed that the students valued and embraced the opportunity to work with their peers and the idea of learning from each other. Of particular note here is that many expressed that they were able to complete the tasks only because of team efforts. Theoretically, this would precisely be the point of employing task-based learning for language learning whereby students can learn and acquire knowledge by 'filling gaps in each other's knowledge' through meaningful tasks (Prabhu, 1987). Yet, any success through collaborative learning, of course, cannot be easily achieved as some participants self-admitted. But by overcoming the obstacles associated with team dynamics, they reportedly have developed (or improved) their social skills, such as communication skills.

Second, TBI has apparently provided an opportunity for students to become aware of their own learning so they can identify areas for improvement and personal growth (Theme 2). This realisation is particularly vital for developing further valuable skill sets, such as critical-thinking and decision-making skills. Third, the use of authentic materials, such as apartment rental listings, was also proven beneficial in both stimulating student interest and fostering cultural knowledge attached to the language (Theme 3). As an additional benefit, an exposure to authentic English through these materials also appeared to help boost their confidence. Subsequently, TBI appeared to have an impact on how students viewed English learning. Some students articulated 'what' gains they made from this project while others reported on 'how' TBI helped improve their English skills. It is interesting to note that these achievements are intangible, self-reported skill gains, which were not measured by test scores. This may indicate that they have started to view English not as a school subject, possibly becoming more conscious of their own approach to language learning; the most crucial and first step towards becoming an autonomous learner (Gardner, 2000; Nunan, 2003).

The findings would also shed some light on the main issue of this study: the socio-cultural appropriateness of TBI in the Japanese context. That is, despite the concerns about a mismatch between the characteristics of TBI and Japanese students' learning styles, the findings suggest otherwise; although TBI might have imposed a change of learning behaviour on the students, they demonstrated a great deal of flexibility to the new style of learning with little evidence that such a change would conflict with their socio-cultural expectations. This is not, however, to proclaim that every learner in the Japanese context is readily equipped with skills and mindsets to take on an unconventional approach to learning, or that TBI can be implemented without any adjustments. Even if carefully planned and implemented, as was the case in this study (students' concerns discussed in the previous section), there would always be some learners who would show hesitation or even resistance to anything out of ordinary (Akerlind & Trevitt, 1995; Tharayil et al., 2018). Such reaction is rather understandable, however, given that their prior learning experiences have mostly been the traditional, teacher-centred and passive learning (Waniek & Nae, 2017). In other words, although any newer approach may "conflict with students' past educational experiences and current conceptions of learning" (Akerlind & Trevitt, 1995, p. 7), it is not, perhaps, because of socio-cultural mismatches, but simply because they are not familiar with the approach itself.

In any case, 'scaffolding' plays an important role, particularly when learners are not used to the concepts of learner-centredness (Harris, 2018; Nunan, 1989; Tharayil et al., 2018). Scaffolding support can be implemented at any stage, but it has become clear from this study that similar activities (particularly brainstorming) even before the pre-task phase are helpful. This stage can also be supplemented greatly by assigning homework so each student can take their own time to be prepared. At the pre-tertiary level at which grammar rules are needed to be taught, this pre-task stage can be extended and expanded greatly by incorporating focus-on-form(s), which can then be reinforced during the post-task stage (Willis & Willis, 2009). Depending on the type of task, the use of their L1 among learners (so long as the outcomes are produced in the L2) may help ease anxiety, hence leading to greater student engagement. As many practitioners agree (see Harris, 2018), 'scaffolding' can gradually be removed when learners become accustomed to, and comfortable with, the idea of student-centred learning.

Rationale for TBI in Japanese EFL Contexts

Once learners understand basic linguistic forms that are good enough for ordering food, for example, at McDonald's, they need to test out such linguistic knowledge to see if it works for real. For language learners in the ESL contexts, this is easily done as a testing ground is readily available to them. In the L2 input-scarce linguistic environment, like Japan, task-based lessons can instead create an L2-like environment where learners can see if they can function in the target language. The internet is full of authentic English resources that are both intriguing and pedagogical. Teachers in the EFL contexts can utilise these resources to the fullest while ensuring that "the language used inside the classroom is connected with the language used outside the classroom" (Nunan, 2007, p. 1, as cited in Hilsenbeck, 2011) and chances for 'noticing' for 'incidental' learning can be enhanced (Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998), even within an EFL environment. As was evident from this study, when students engage in challenging and meaningful tasks, most, if not all, would likely start to perceive language learning somewhat differently, take ownership of their learning, and pay attention to the linguistic forms on their own terms.

Conclusion

Limitations, Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Prior to concluding, limitations to this action research must be noted. First, the model implemented in this action study was a weaker form of TBI carried out at the tertiary level, hence the findings may be applicable to the specific context in which it was implemented. Second, there were uncontrollable variables, such as teacher effects and students' individual learning experiences. Given that more than 87 percent of the participants had never experienced TBI or similar activities in the past, for instance, a novelty factor might have contributed to the positive student responses. Lastly, this study only administered a text-based survey to obtain student feedback. In order to further validate the findings of this study, data can be supplemented by a semi-structured interview by conducting a similar study or a strong form of TBI, in different teaching settings. It is believed that such research provides richer insights into learner perceptions of the task-based approach, which would ultimately help design task-based syllabuses that are well-suited in each Japanese teaching context.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study seems to support not only the claims previously made about the benefits of implementing TBI in the classroom, but also the notion that "the previous learning styles of students are not held to be major obstacles" (Harris, 2018, p. 146). When TBI seems socio-culturally unfit for learners in certain EFL contexts, it is probably due to their unfamiliarity and lack of experience with the approach, not because of their aptitude of learning, nor the efficacy of TBI per se (Tharayil et al., 2018).

Due to the exam-oriented culture, both learners and educators in some Asian contexts have been accustomed to focusing on short-term gains (test scores). Understandably then, TBI might be seen as an obstacle to achieving such goals as it is not intended for producing quick gains (Carless, 2007; Ellis, 2009).

As anyone who has studied foreign language(s) may agree, however, language learning (and acquisition) is a life-long, gradual process (Krashen, 1981) that one's linguistic competence cannot easily be measured merely by test scores. If the ultimate goal of language instruction is to help foster communicative competence in learners, then opportunities for language use need to be optimised (Willis & Willis, 2009). TBI, which allows for a holistic approach to language learning, may be the ideal solution (Ellis 2003; Nunn & Thurman, 2010; Willis, 1996), especially for learners in the EFL contexts.

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Appendix

Survey Questionnaire

Part 1: About your past experiences with English learning

Q1. What were your English classes like during junior/high school years? (Check all that apply)

Q2. Have you experienced a similar project in English classes before?

Q2-1. If yes, what type of project did you do? Please explain.

Part 2: About the project

Q1. Were there any tasks that you felt challenging to complete?

Q1-2. If so, what was the task? Why did you feel that way? Please explain.

Q2. Do you think you learned something new through this project?

Q2-1. Why do you think so? Please explain.

Q3. Please feel free to describe anything that you felt about the project, including anything you found helpful or challenging. Suggestions for improvements are also welcome.