

Title

The use of Task-Based Language Teaching to increase Japanese university students' communicative competence

Introduction

In 2022, I started teaching English as a part-time lecturer at Sugiyama Jogakuen University. Although I had obtained my Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA) the previous year and had years of experience teaching adults at my local Eikaiwa (English conversation school) and teaching young children as an assistant language teacher (ALT), this was a new experience to teach at this level. The program provides a curriculum and recommended lesson plans but instructors have the freedom of teaching method as long as the objective of the lessons are met. The curriculum follows the Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) approach with elements of the Audiolingual Method (ALM). Lessons are structured with a warm-up, accuracy production, controlled practice, and freer practice with a model dialogue and rote memorization encouraged. This was useful as I had been taught using this approach during my CELTA.

Upon starting my journey in 2024 as a master's student at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS), I was encouraged to adapt my teaching method using the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. After some research, I decided to adopt a Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach to my teaching and action research (AR) and develop task-based activities in my lessons.

Teaching Context

- (1) Level: Non-English majors first year university students in the Education department
- (2) Class size: 14-15 students (four classes, a total of 57 students)

- (3) Time: 40 minutes x four lessons per week
- (4) Textbook: Pearson English Firsthand Success
- (5) Delivery: Face-to-face with assignments and final project

This year, I taught first-year students from the Education department in the spring and fall semesters. This is a General English (GE) course focusing on simple greetings and basic vocabulary related to everyday life. The main teaching problem I faced was helping students improve their communication abilities. The students typically have low English proficiency, especially speaking and listening. In November, the students undertook the Cambridge English A2 Key for Schools (KET) exam, which is aimed at school-age learners at the A2 level under the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The passing rate for the previous year's students was 51.2% from around 180 students. I was a speaking examiner for students from other classes excluding mine and was disappointed at the students' overall performance. The students' main struggle was understanding the questions being asked and answering appropriately. I implemented CLT and TBLT into my teaching in the hopes that my students could improve their communication abilities and pass their exams.

One additional problem I faced was the length of lessons. Typically, university lessons are ninety minutes once a week but I taught forty-minute lessons four times a week. With only forty minutes to teach per lesson, it was difficult to implement a well-designed TBLT lesson whilst using four skills integration.

Goal and Objective

Goals

The goal of my AR is to increase my students' communicative competence through the use of Task-Based Language Teaching.

Objectives

By using task-based activities in the classroom:

- (1) Students will improve their perceived English communication abilities over the two semesters.
- (2) Students will be able to hold a 2-minute conversation using five kinds of communication strategies (CS) appropriately and effectively by the end of the second semester.
- (3) Students will improve their speaking test performance according to a pre-designed rubric by the end of the second semester.

Literature Review

This literature review is structured into three sub-sections, each providing background information from different sources and summarizing the current state of research. The first sub-section covers traditional methods of language teaching. The second sub-section discusses the theories behind communicative language teaching (CLT). The third sub-section introduces some concepts behind task-based language teaching (TBLT).

Traditional Methods

The Grammar Translation Method (GTM) is one of the earliest approaches to language teaching and “dominated European and foreign language teaching from the 1840s to the 1940s.” (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 7). This approach involves translating language word-by-word and teaching grammar rules explicitly. Noam Chomsky’s theory of universal grammar (UG) explains that grammar is universal and humans have an innate knowledge “language faculty” to understand the rules of principles of a language; GTM can be interpreted as an early example of a cognitive model where language is built up, and

translation becomes inherent in the mind. This approach has been widely criticized for the lack of speaking and listening practice for students. Despite the inefficiency and criticism, this approach remains in English teaching in Japanese public schools. Despite the inefficiency and criticism, this approach remains in English teaching in Japanese public schools.

The Audiolingual Method (ALM) emerged as an approach to language teaching in the United States shortly after the Second World War from the Army Specialized Training Program (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 58) to quickly train soldiers in foreign languages. ALM became more prominent as more attention was given to foreign language teaching in the United States. This approach focuses on memorization and drilling practice; students are trained at “memorizing dialogues and practicing sentences patterns, usually through drills,” (Lee & VanPatten, 2003, p. 9). ALM is based on the behaviourist theory of learning and structural linguistics that learners “imitate and practice “ in order to form “habits of correct language use” (Lightbown & Spada, 2021, p. 15). The decline of ALM in the United States began when teachers found that practical skills acquired in the classroom were not transferred to real communication outside the classroom. Many linguists rejected the validity of ALM notably Noam Chomsky who argued that behaviorism did not explain how children can acquire a language so quickly and language learning involves innovation and formation of new sentences. Even though ALM had been widely criticized, some elements such as choral repetition and pronunciation drilling remain in teaching today and are readily present in Japanese school textbooks.

Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) is a teaching approach used in Situational Language Teaching (SLT) developed in the UK where “thousands of teachers who studied for the RSA/Cambridge Certificate...were required to master in the 1980s and early 1990s” (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 54) and is still widely popular today. “Grammar is presented

in three phases; Presentation (introduction of a new teaching item in context, Practice (control practice of the item), and Production (a freer practice phrase)(Willis & Willis, 1996)” (p. 54). However, PPP is criticized for being too rigid and teacher-centered.

Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a teaching approach first introduced in the 1970s due to the criticisms of GTM, ALM, and SLT and the increased demand for a more effective approach to language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, pp. 83–84). It is often referred to as an approach rather than a method as the assumptions and beliefs about language and language learning are specific; within one approach, there can be many methods. Early American and British proponents of CLT (p. 85) described the approach to: (1) Make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and, (2) Develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication. CLT led to major changes in approaches to language teaching and the focus on increasing the communicative competence (CC) of students became central to CLT.

Communicative Competence

The term Communicative Competence was first coined by Hymes (1972) in what he describes as the goal of CLT. Hymes states a person demonstrating CC acquires both knowledge and ability for language use. It implies a speaker’s need to not only use grammar and vocabulary correctly but also to use the language appropriate in various social contexts. Canale and Swain (1980) expanded on Hyme’s work and proposed three underlying components of CC and Canale (1983) later added discourse competence:

- (1) Grammatical competence
- (2) Sociolinguistic competence
- (3) Strategic competence
- (4) Discourse competence

Grammatical competence describes the linguistic ability of the learner, the ability to use correct grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and sentence structures. Sociolinguistic competence describes the understanding of the social context and the communicative purpose of the interaction occurring. Strategic competence describes the ability to overcome communication difficulties by employing coping strategies such as initiating, terminating, maintaining, and paraphrasing. Discourse competence describes the ability to interpret how meaning is represented in relationship to the entire discourse or text. Some examples include organizing sentences and phrases into coherent and cohesive speech or writing that contains meaning in context.

The usefulness of CC is further supported by Savignon (1983) , who created an inverted pyramid to illustrate that all components are interrelated and that one cannot develop a single competence in isolation. When an ability in one component increases, it interacts with other components and increases a learner's overall CC. Importantly, strategic competence is present at all proficiency levels, but its impact on overall CC stays the same as other competencies increase. An updated version of the pyramid can be seen in Figure 1.1 below. Here, sociolinguistic competence has been replaced by the broader term of sociocultural competence.

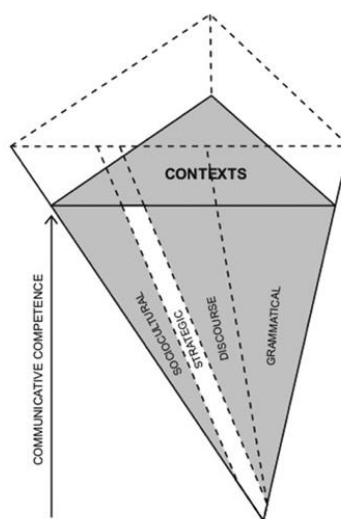


Figure 1.1 Components of communicative competence. (Savignon, 2002)

Definition of Communicative Language Teaching

Savignon (1997) defines communication as “the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning” (p. 225). All four components of CC must be acquired in order for a learner to become competent in the act of communication. Therefore, the focus of CLT should be to develop CC. This notion is further expanded by Brown (2007) who defines the following approach:

- (1) Classroom goals are focused on all four components of communicative competence.
- (2) Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes.
- (3) Fluency and accuracy are seen as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques.
- (4) Students ultimately have to use the language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts. (p. 241)

Brown’s four key aspects shows us that the focus of CLT should be on developing CC and using communicative activities that learners are expected to engaged in outside the classroom. Activities should be practical and genuine and meaning should be prioritized in the classroom over form.

Task-Based Language Teaching

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an approach to language teaching which was established in the 1980s primarily due to research in CLT (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 174) and has gained popularity in the past few decades. An early proponent of TBLT, David Nunan (1989) introduced TBLT principles in designing communicative learning tasks. Another important contributor, Peter Skehan (1998) emphasized the role task-based learning can facilitate in cognitive processes of language acquisition. TBLT draws its key principles

from CLT (Willis & Willis, 2007), with emphasis on activities that involve real communication and meaningful language used for carrying out tasks to promote learning. Supporters of TBLT contrast it with earlier traditional approaches to language teaching, such as ALM and GTM. With support from prominent scholars, TBLT remains a key approach within CLT and proves an effective method of language teaching.

Definition of Tasks

There are different definitions used by various scholars but they all fundamentally agree that a task should focus on meaningful communication with real-world definition. According to (Ellis & Shintani, 2014), the focus of any language task should be the meaning of language, rather than grammatical features, with the goal of promoting meaningful communication and interaction. The task should be complete and make sense in real-world contexts. Five characteristics of a task are outlined below: (Skehan, 1998)

- (1) Meaning is primary.
- (2) Learners are not given other people's meaning to regurgitate.
- (3) There is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities.
- (4) Task completion has some priority.
- (5) The assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.

Bygate, Skehan & Swain (2013) further stress that tasks should be purposeful and meaningful, encouraging learners to use language to achieve specific goals. Long (1985) defines a task as things people do in everyday life. Overall, scholars agree that tasks should reflect real-life situations and require learners to apply their cognitive abilities and target language knowledge through active participation and interaction.

Classification of Tasks

Nunan outlines tasks into two classifications: real-world or target task, and pedagogical task. According to Nunan (2004), real-world tasks simulate a real-life situation

where learners practice conversations they could face outside the classroom. For example, real-world tasks include everyday functions such as giving directions or ordering at a restaurant. It can also include work functions such as writing resumes, filling out forms, or making inquiries through the phone. Lastly, it can also include social functions such as making small talk, asking for help, or expressing your opinion. On the other hand, pedagogical tasks are typically designed for the classroom and learners are not directing role-playing in a real-world situation. Pedagogical tasks do not have clearly identifiable goals but are meaning-focused because they aim to help students develop language skills through structured instruction. Precisely, a pedagogical task should be “comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language” (Nunan, 2004, p. 4) and give the learner a sense of completeness. Nunan outlines a number of task typologies from different sources with the most useful being Prabhu’s (see Table 1). Each task infers a “gap” for learners to fill.

Table 1 A typology of task types

Type of task	Definition
Information gap	This type involves “a transfer of given information from one person to another – or from one form to another, or from one place to another.”
Reasoning gap	This type involves “deriving some new information from given information through the processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns.”
Opinion gap	This type involves “identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation.”

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Tasks can also be classified as focused and unfocused. Ellis (2003) states a focused task requires the learner to use a particular linguistic feature but not necessarily a grammatical

structure. An unfocused task is one where the learner can use any linguistic resources to complete the task.

Task-Based Syllabus Design

When designing a task-based syllabus, Ellis (2009) advocates for an approach following four criteria:

- (1) The primary focus should be on “meaning.”
- (2) There should be some kind of “gap.”
- (3) Learners should largely have to rely on their own resources in order to complete the activity.
- (4) There is a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language.

The first criterion is universally agreed upon by most TBLT scholars that a task should focus on meaning over grammar. The second criterion states there should be a “gap” for learners to infer meaning in an information exchange task. This does not mean simply filling in information but acquiring it for a purpose, and some examples include information gap task and group decisions task (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). The third criterion allows learners to use their own linguistic resources and non-linguistic resources, not dictated by the teacher. The fourth criterion indicates a task has some non-linguistic outcome. In contrast to the PPP approach, a task is not limited to accurate language use and there is a final goal. Importantly, Ellis states that if any of the four criteria are missing, it becomes a grammatical exercise rather than a task.

TBLT Framework

Willis (1996) popularized the framework, as seen in Figure 1.2 below. Willis stressed that learner-learner interaction should be prioritized during the task cycle and teacher-centered activity should only be in the pre-task and language focus stages. Ellis (2003) divides the task execution into three phases: pre-task phase, main task, and post-task phase.

The pre-task phase introduces the task, engages students, and provides relevant background information. The main task phase involves interactive activities like group discussion, role-plays, and debates, structured into three steps: task, planning, and reporting. The post-task phase shifts focus from meaning to form, reinforcing key language points.

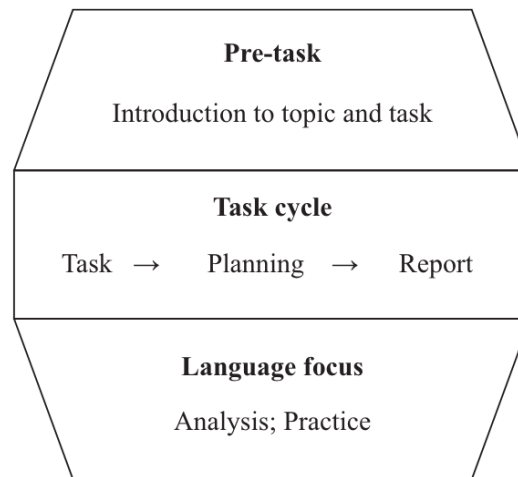


Figure 1.2 Components of communicative competence.(J. Willis, 1996)

Research Questions

- (1) What is the impact, if any, do task-based activities have on university students' perception of their English communication abilities?
- (2) To what degree, if any, do task-based activities have on university students' communicative competence?

Method (What I did)

Participants

The target class had 14 students in the spring semester and 15 students in the fall semester and all students participated in my action research through both semesters. They

graduated from different high schools and have varying levels of English ability. They are energetic and hard-working students.

Data Collection

A mixed methods approach was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, including questionnaires, classroom observation recordings, and timed conversation recordings. All students in the target class were surveyed as part of the author's AR. The following surveys were administered to analyze: (see Appendix C)

- (1) The students' perceived English ability pre-term and post-term.
- (2) The students' reflection on task-based activities post-task.
- (3) The students' self-evaluation after timed conversation at the beginning and end of the fall semester.

The data were collected through Google Forms and the participants completed them voluntarily. Consent was gained from the participants before using the data for my AR. To protect the students' privacy, all names used in this report are pseudonyms. The questionnaires were presented in Japanese so the students could answer in their L1. The Japanese translations used were carefully reviewed and checked by the author, who holds a Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) N2 certification, demonstrating advanced proficiency in Japanese. To ensure accuracy to the original meaning, a sample of the translation was cross-checked by a native Japanese speaker.

Classroom observations were conducted over the course of the fall semester. This involved the teacher making notes during class and recording a video of the classroom. Video recordings of timed conversations were taken and excerpts were produced to analyse my students' communicative competence.

Spring semester

In the spring semester, I implemented task-based activities into my lessons with elements of PPP focusing on dialogue practice and pronunciation accuracy. My students were required to take notes on vocabulary and model conversations. I did information gap activities (e.g., filling in tables for information), but there were no end goals, and students simply completed a set of information without knowing why. During the semester, I introduced my students to communication strategies from the Basic Conversation Strategies (Kehe & Kehe, 2022).

Fall semester

In the fall semester, I changed my teaching approach and developed task-focused lessons where the students had a “goal” to complete. I made handouts for students. (see appendix for example lesson). With advice from Prof. Sato, I implemented two speaking tests at the beginning and end of the semester. A communicative competence rubric (Appendix D) was created to evaluate the performance of the students’ speaking tests.

Results (What happened)

I will present the results of my AR into two subsections: Task-based activities and Speaking Tests.

Task-Based Activities

Using Prabhu's task typology, students participated in three different task types (Information gap, Opinion gap, Reasoning gap).

Information Gap

Students participated in this activity by asking for information and answering each other about their last holiday. This activity involved all four English skills. Based on classroom observations, students enjoyed the teacher-led instruction at the start of the lesson.

They were focused on listening to the teacher and giving answers in front of the class.

Students could ask the required questions and had little difficulty completing the task.

Students were asked what they found enjoyable about this task:

Moa: みんなの旅行の話を聞けたこと。適切な疑問文で喋れたこと。 {being able to listen to everyone’s travel stories. Being able to speak with appropriate questions}

In this quote, Moa stated that she was able to listen to everyone’s travel stories and speak using appropriate questions. Other students also expressed they enjoyed the lesson because they were able to talk to their classmates about their holidays.

Students were asked to rate their agreement with the statement, “This task helped improve my English communication skills,” with the results shown in Figure 2 below. Of the 12 students, two answered somewhat agree, three answered agree, and seven answered strongly agree.

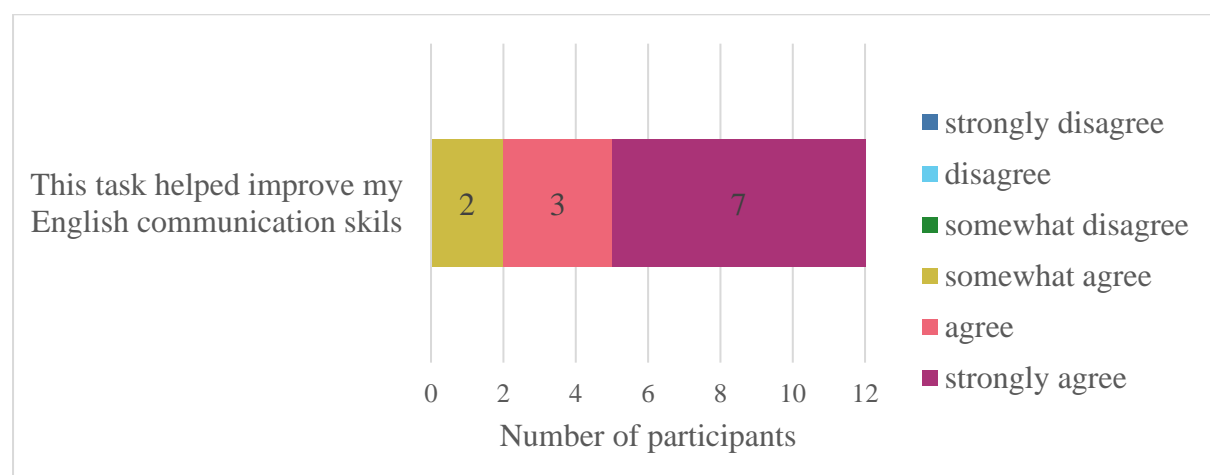


Figure 2. Learner belief that their English communication skills improved over this task.

Reasoning Gap

Students participated in this activity using their logical reasoning power to solve a puzzle (guessing a secret character). They needed to ask yes/no questions in English and logically deduct their identity by the process of elimination. Based on classroom observations, most students were able to think of and ask questions without prompts but some would revert to speaking in Japanese when they didn't know how to ask a question in English. Most students were able to guess their identity by the end of the task. Students were asked what they found difficult about this task.

Sana: 確信をつける質問をすること。質問でYesと答えさせること。{asking questions that build conviction. Getting others to answer “Yes” with a question}

In this quote, Sana stated that she found it difficult to ask others yes/no questions with conviction. Based on classroom observations, students encouraged and helped each other when they didn't know what to ask or struggled to guess. Many students said “絞る” {shiboru, narrow down} to tell other students to narrow down their choices.

Students were asked to rate their agreement with the statement, “This task helped improve my English communication skills,” with the results shown in Figure 3 below. Of the 12 students, two answered somewhat agree, two answered agree and eight answered strongly agree.

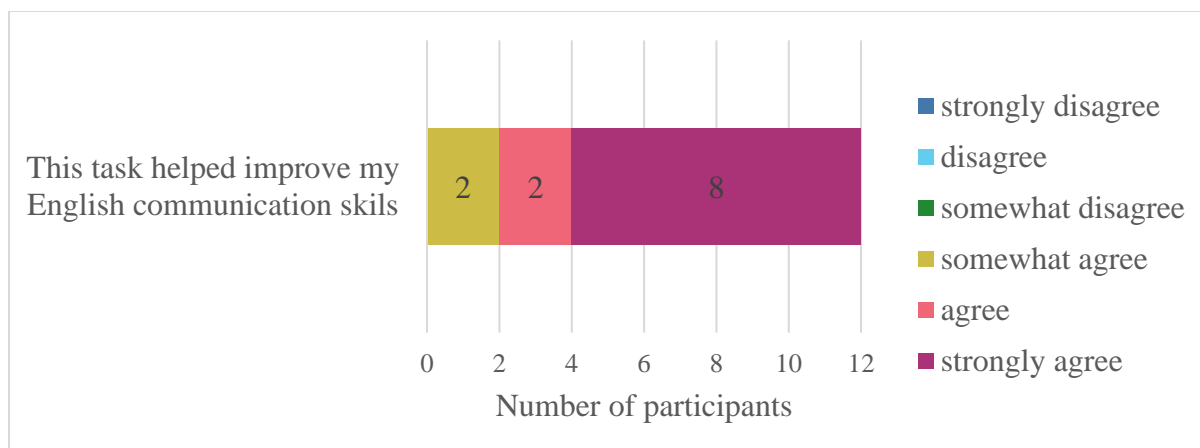


Figure 3. Learner belief that their English communication skills improved over this task.

Opinion Gap

Students participated in this activity by discussing and expressing their opinions in groups. They read a conversation about a person with a difficult decision to make and discussed what they understood from the reading. They analyzed why it was a difficult decision from both sides. Then, they had to express what they would do if they were in the same position. Based on classroom observations, students enjoyed listening to others' opinions and expressing their ideas. Students were asked what they found enjoyable about this task:

Fuyu: 自分の考え方とは違う考え方を知ることができたこと。{being able to learn about ways of thinking different from my own way of thinking}

In this quote, Fuyu stated that she enjoyed being able to understand a way of thinking different from hers. In fact, most students enjoyed being able to express what they think. It was captivating to see students' reaction when they heard a different opinion to their own in the observation. Although students enjoyed exchanging opinions in this task, students often spoke Japanese when their linguistic level were not sufficient. This is clear when students

were asked the statement “I performed this task using only English,” with the results show in Figure 4 below. Of the 13 students, five answered negatively indicating they most likely used some amount of Japanese during the task.

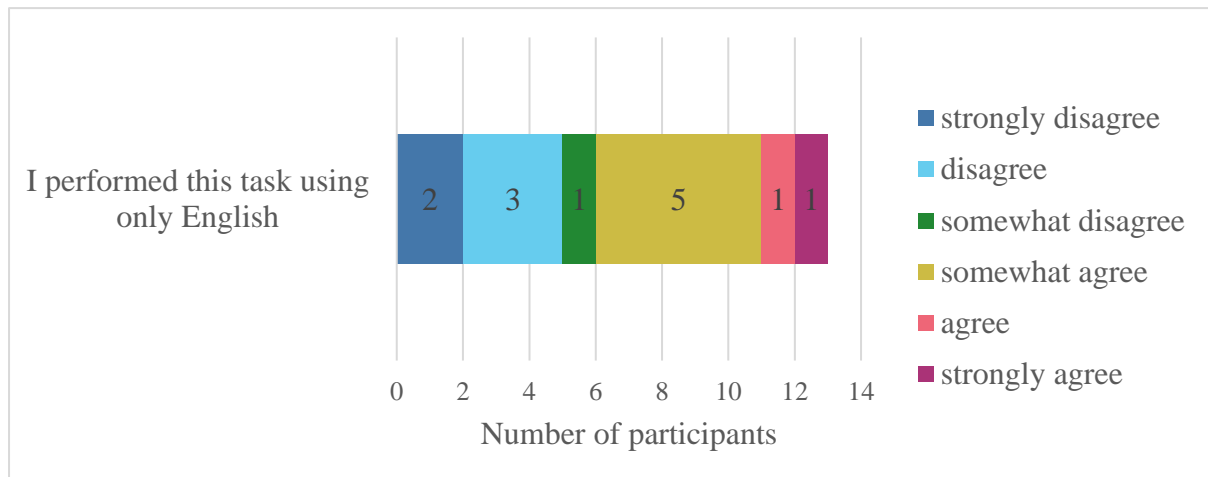


Figure 4. Learner belief that they only use English during this task.

Students were asked to rate their agreement with the statement, “This task helped improve my English communication skills,” with the results shown in Figure 5 below. Of the 13 students, two answered disagree, one answered somewhat agree, five answered agree and five answered strongly agree.



Figure 5. Learner belief that their English communication skills improved over this task.

Students' Perceived English ability

Students were asked to evaluate their English ability through questionnaires administered in April, September, and December. The average scores of the participants are presented by categories in Figure 6 below. A 5-point Likert Scale was used in this questionnaire. The total number of participants was 13 in both semesters.

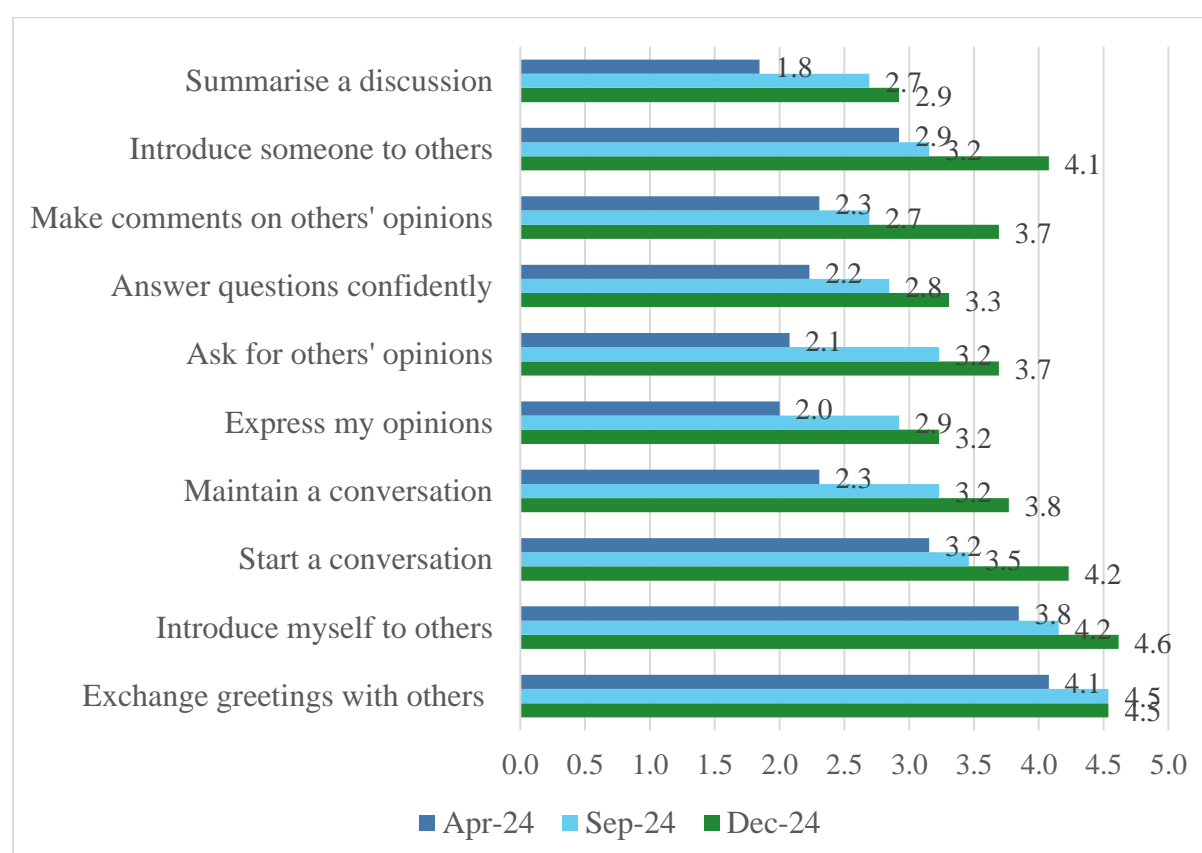


Figure 6. Students' perceived English communication ability questionnaire results over the two semesters.

The average scores of all 10 categories increased from April to September. This suggests the students believed their English ability improved after the spring semester. In particular, students feel they improved at “ask for others’ opinions” as this category rose by 1.2 points. They also believed they improved at “summarize a discussion”, “maintain a

conversation” and “express my opinions” as these categories rose by 0.9 points. The students had many opportunities throughout the spring semester to interact with other students and have conversations about everyday topics. They feel more confident in participating in English conversations.

The average scores of all 10 categories increased from September to December except for “exchange greetings with others” which stayed the same. This suggests the students believed their English ability improved again after the fall semester. In particular, students feel they improved at “make comments on others’ opinions” as this category rose by 1 point. They also believed they improved at “introduce someone to others” as this category rose by 0.9 points. The students took part in more goal-oriented tasks in the fall semester and this helped them improve their English communication ability further. Overall, it is clear the students believed their English communication ability improved after undertaking TBLT lessons.

Student comments

Most students found TBLT useful for their learning. In the below quote, Ayane comments on the benefits of having a task to complete. Some positive comments from other students talks about the opportunities they received from being able to interact with many students and hearing various opinions. Interaction with their classmates makes the lesson more fun for them.

Ayane: 特定のタスクがあることで、目標が見え、達成出来た時に満足感が得られていいと思う。 {I think it is good to have a specific task so that students can see the goal and feel satisfied when they achieve it}

However, Sana pointed out in the below quote that the difference in linguistic level between students caused difficulties. Weaker students can feel left behind, and unable to express their opinions. Students can quickly see the difference in English levels and tasks became difficult to complete

Sana : 目標達成するために協力が必要なため、英語が得意な子と苦手な子、意見を言うのが得意な子と苦手な子で差が分かりやすく出てしまい、いつもは簡単に達成できる目標に苦戦してしまうことがあること。

{ We needed to work together to achieve our goals, it was easy to see the difference between those who were good at English and those who were not so good, and between those who were good at expressing their opinions and those who were not so good, and we sometimes struggled to achieve goals that were usually easy to achieve. }

While most students felt they had improved their communication abilities. In the below quote, Fuyu had mixed opinions. She believed her communication skills improved but her grammatical and vocabulary skills did not.

Fuyu : コミュニケーションスキルは、上達したと思いますが、難しい言葉の言い換えなどの語彙力が、自分なりに頑張って伝えようと努力はしたが、相手に分かりやすく伝えることができず、語彙力があまり上達しなかったと思います。 { I think my communication skills have improved, but

my vocabulary skills, such as paraphrasing difficult words, did not improve much because I could not communicate clearly to others, although I tried my best to convey the message in my own way.}

Speaking Tests

Two speaking tests were conducted in September and November during the fall semester. Before each test, students practiced using CS to talk about the relevant topic for that week. The topics were “free time” in September and “things you like to do” in November. On the day of the test, students were assigned to random pairs and recorded speaking for two minutes. Three students Sana (middle level), Izu (lower level) and Ayane (higher level) were chosen as focus students. The performances of these three focus students were evaluated by the researcher using a CC rubric (Appendix D) and excerpts were created to analyze the development of the students’ CC.

Sana’s development (Middle Level)

Sana’s scores improved in the second speaking test illustrated in Table 2 below. She was able to use more CS and follow-up questions. Importantly, her fluency score increased (+1).

Table 2 Sana’s speaking test scores

Category	Sana’s Score (September)	Sana’s Score (November)
Fluency (7)	4	5
Accuracy (5)	4	4
CS (3)	2	3
Follow-up questions (4)	3	4

Sana's display of fluency is demonstrated in the below Excerpts 1 and 2 taken from speaking tests in September and November respectively. The Excerpts shows the passage in conversation when she displayed the most pauses and hesitations. In Excerpt 1, Sana spoke with frequent pauses between words illustrated in Line 12 where she paused five times between a single or two words. In Line 13, she showed repetition "best" and pauses in between. She also showed hesitation "uh" and "eh" in Line 14 and 15 respectively.

Excerpt 1

Sana's display of fluency during speaking test (September 2024)

10 Amy what do you spend free time [00:00:48:13]
 11 Sana I usually sleep (...) I like sleep ha ha [00:00:54:24]
 always I (...) not (...) sleep (...) so I (...) I have (...)
 free time I must (...) sleep [00:01:09:04]
 12 Amy how many times (...) how how long? [00:01:14:13]
 13 Sana best (...) best long? (...) ((S holds hands out)) uh five
 hour ha ha [00:01:19:08]
 but (...) eh (...) usually sometimes three hours (...) if I
 have to go work (...) [00:01:31:19]

In Excerpt 2, Sana showed improvements in using less pauses between her words, the most she displayed were two pauses in Line 9. Moreover, she did not show any hesitation or repetition during the speaking test.

Excerpt 2

Sana's display of fluency during speaking test (November 2024)

09 Sana do you do you go to (...) concert (...) his one
 [00:01:02:21]
 10 Shi yes I do [00:01:06:18]
 11 Sana where (...) did you go [00:01:07:17]
 12 Shi I went to:: (...) concert last month [00:01:14:17]
 13 Sana oh last month it's nice [00:01:16:18]
 14 Shi yay and I am going to (...) his concert (...) next year
 [00:01:28:09]
 15 Sana wow concert his concert decide next year [00:01:33:17]

Izu's development (Lower Level)

Izu's scores improved slightly in the second speaking test illustrated in Table 3 below. Her fluency and accuracy remained the same but her score for CS (+1) and follow-up questions (+2) increased. The teaching of CS had a positive impact on her CC.

Table 3 Izu's speaking test scores

Category	Izu's Score (September)	Izu's Score (November)
Fluency (7)	4	4
Accuracy (5)	3	3
CS (3)	3	4
Follow-up questions (4)	0	2

I introduced the use of CS in conversations early in the fall semester. In Excerpt 3, Izu demonstrated some skills of CS by using rejoinder “oh” in Line 5 and shadowing “you go to sweets paradise?” in Line 7. She failed to demonstrate the use of follow-up questions during this test. The use of follow-up questions is more difficult but other students were able to do so in this speaking test.

Excerpt 3

Izu's use of CS and follow-up questions during speaking test (September 2024)

04 Mea I went to streets paradise [00:00:18:00]
05 Izu o::h (I nods twice) me too me too [00:00:20:03]
06 Mea (M nods and laughs) o::h [00:00:22:00]
07 Izu (I looks up and thinks) you go to sweets paradise? [00:00:30:00]
08 Mea (..) (M nods) how about you [00:00:35:26]
09 Izu I:: (...) want to go (..) shopping? [00:00:44:21]
10 Mea um (M nods) [00:00:45:15]
11 Izu I bought (..) I bought um new clothes [00:00:51:17]

In Excerpt 4, Izu was able to improve her use of CS. She demonstrated the use of follow-up questions by asking “what Kpop idol” in Line 17 and “why do you like Zerobaseone” in Line

21. She was able to ask follow-up questions naturally without prompt, something she was not able to do so before.

Excerpt 4

Izu's use of CS and follow-up questions during speaking test (November 2024)

15 Haruna u::m I like (...) Kpop idol [00:00:59:23]
 16 Izu oh (I moves head back) [00:01:00:13]
 (I opens hands out) what Kpop idol [00:01:05:16]
 17 Haruna I like (...) Zerobaseone [00:01:11:06]
 18 Izu ha ha [00:01:11:06]
 19 Haruna and nine member (H shows nine on hand) [00:01:15:28]
 20 Izu why do you like Zerobaseone ha ha [00:01:23:05]
 21 Haruna because they looks like very cool and very tall
 [00:01:33:13]

Ayane's development (Higher Level)

Ayane's scores increased and decreased slightly in the second speaking test illustrated in Table 4 below. Her fluency score (+1) increased but her use of CS (-1) and follow-up questions (-1) decreased.

Table 4 Ayane's speaking test scores

Category	Ayane's Score (September)	Ayane's Score (November)
Fluency (7)	5	6
Accuracy (5)	3	3
CS (3)	2	1
Follow-up questions (4)	3	2

In general, Ayane displayed good speaking fluency during both speaking tests. In September, she made a few pauses and repetitions when speaking in Line 6 from Excerpt 5. In November, she rarely paused or repeated words during the conversation. Line 24 from Excerpt 6 shows the only time she paused as she was thinking about the answer.

Excerpt 5

Ayane's display of fluency during speaking test (September 2024)

05 Luka what time (.) did you (.) go to bed [00:00:11:13]
06 Ayane I (...) went I went to (...) about ah I went to bed アバ:
ウト {abau:to, about} eleven hours [00:00:25:24]
07 Luka eleven? [00:00:27:21]
08 Ayane eleven [00:00:27:56]
09 Luka ooh ha (.) .hh [00:00:29:17]
10 Ayane how about you ((A puts one hand out)) [00:00:31:20]
11 Luka I (...) I:: went to bed (.) at one (.) ha ha ha (.) AM
[00:00:40:08]
12 Ayane ((A puts one hand out)) what do you do on freetime?

Excerpt 6

Ayane's display of fluency during speaking test (November 2024)

18 Ayane I ライク {raiku, like} little glee monster [00:01:53:07]
19 Miyu o::h little glee monster [00:01:53:57]
20 Ayane because their voice is beautiful [00:01:56:02]
21 Miyu beautiful ok acapella? [00:01:58:29]
22 Ayane yes [00:02:00:12]
23 Miyu how many members (holds out hand) little glee monster
[00:02:07:26]
24 Ayane a:h before (...) about seven [00:02:15:22]

Interestingly, she displayed less use of CS and follow-up questions in the second speaking test. This could be attributed to a different speaking partner. In November, Ayane's speaking test partner Miyu took the lead in the conversation and spoke longer than Ayane. As a result, Ayane had less opportunity to use CS and follow-up questions during the conversation.

Discussion (What I Learned)

The purpose of this study was to examine the following two research questions about TBLT and communicative competence:

- (1) What is the impact, if any, do task-based activities have on university students' perception of their English communication abilities?

(2) To what degree, if any, do task-based activities have on university students' communicative competence?

To answer the first RQ, this study suggests the introduction of task-based activities in the classroom positively impacted students' perception of their English communication ability. Students reported gradual increases over the two semesters in different aspects of communication and noted the usefulness of task-based activities in the classroom. The information-gap task was particularly effective in helping students to obtain information and negotiate meaning. The opinion-gap task was challenging for low-proficiency students and required scaffolding before students could participate in discussions.

To answer the second RQ, it is unclear whether students' CC increased as a result of TBLT. While there are some indications that students developed their speaking fluency and use of CS, the evidence supporting this claim is limited. Moreover, the lack of multiple test evaluators and the limited number of tests significantly reduces the assessment's credibility.

Future Issues

While the findings of this study suggest that TBLT contributed to the development of students' CC, there remains an obvious need to investigate the long-term impact of TBLT and how engagement in task-based activities influences developmental outcomes. One key issue in task-based assessment is the difficulty in establishing more reliable and valid measures that accurately assess student development. Multiple and repeated testing across a period should be implemented, and the same tasks should be repeated throughout the semester to ensure familiarity for students. In addition, low proficiency level students often struggle with task-based activities as their lack of linguistic ability leads to cognitive overload. We need to refine task design to match task complexity to student level. We should explore how adjusting task complexity and scaffolding affects task performance and language

output. Additionally, I seek to determine which types of pre-task planning strategies can help students express their ideas better.

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Appendix A

Information Gap Task - Lesson Plan Sample

Aims: To talk about our last holiday

Level: University 1st year students

Time: 40 mins lesson

Materials: Handout

Time	Interaction T-Ss, S-S, S	Activity & Procedure
10 (7) (3)	T-Ss S-S	Pre-Task <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher introduces a short demonstration about their last holiday. Students match question sentences to key phrases. (e.g., Where did you go? – I went to Wakayama) Students engage in a 1-minute conversation about their holidays using question words and Communication Strategies (CS). Teacher encourages students to speak as long as they can using only English.
20 (10) (10)	S Ss-Ss	Main Task: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Students write some information about their last holiday. Students walk around the classroom and talk to different students asking for their information using the information gap task
10 (7) (3)	S S	Post-Task: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Students write short reporting sentences about their classmates (e.g., she went to... she did...) Exit Survey – What did you learn? What did you want to say but could not?

Appendix B

Information Gap Task – Lesson Handout



My Last Holiday	Your Partner's Last Holiday	Your Partner's Last Holiday
	Partner's name: _____	Partner's name: _____
I went to... _____	She went to... _____	She went to... _____
I travelled by... _____	She travelled by... _____	She travelled by... _____
I went... (time/date) _____	She went... (time/date) _____	She went... (time/date) _____
I stayed in a... _____	She stayed in a... _____	She stayed in a... _____
I bought... _____	She bought... _____	She bought... _____
I visited... _____	She visited... _____	She visited... _____
I ate... _____	She ate... _____	She ate... _____
I... (activity) _____	She... (activity) _____	She... (activity) _____

Report: Write some information about your classmate's holiday

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Appendix C

Questionnaires

Pre-term/post-term questionnaire– perceived English communication abilities

How well can you speak English in the following situations?

以下の状況でどれくらい英語を話すことができますか？

*5-point Likert Scale (1: I can't do it at all 全然できません– 5: I can do it well 上手にできます)

1. Exchange greetings with others. 挨拶を交わす。
2. Introduce myself to others. 自己紹介をする。
3. Start a conversation. 会話を始める。
4. Maintain a conversation. 会話を続ける。
5. Express my opinions. 意見を述べる
6. Ask for others' opinions. 他の方の意見を聞き出す。
7. Answer questions confidently. 自信を持って質問に答える。
8. Make comments on others' opinions. 他の方の意見をコメントする。
9. Introduce someone to others. 他の方を紹介する。
10. Summarise a conversation. 話し合いの内容をまとめる。

Post-task questionnaire – students' reflection on task-based activities

Please fill out today's reflection. 今日の振り返りを記入してください。

Today, we practiced (e.g., Information gap task)

今日は、「Information gap」タスクを練習しました。

*6-point Likert Scale (1: Strongly disagree 全くそうは思わない 6: Strongly agree 強くそう思う)

1. I enjoyed this task. このタスクは楽しかった。
2. (Open-ended question) What did you enjoy about this task? このタスクで楽しかったことは？
3. I performed this task using mostly English. このタスクを主に英語を使って実行しました。
4. (Open-ended question) What did you want to say but couldn't in English?
英語で言いたくても言えなかったことは？
5. This task helped improve my English communication
skills. このタスクは英語コミュニケーション能力を上達させるのに役立ちました。
6. (Open-ended question) What was difficult about this task? このタスクで何が難しかった？

Post-test questionnaire – students' reflection on speaking test

Name: ()

Topic: Things you like doing

1. I am good at ...

I want to improve at...

2. I used conversation strategies...

	Opener	Reaction	How about you?	Shadowing	Closer
How many times?					

3. I asked my partner follow-up questions...

-
-
-

4. I can talk for 2 minutes without long pauses or using Japanese. (circle one)

Fair

Good

Excellent

5. Here are three things I said that I want to correct:

Example: I part-time job worked. → I worked at my part-time job.
I like sports is swimming. → I like to go swimming/My favorite sports is swimming

(1)

(2)

(3)

6. On a scale of S, A, B, C, D: I will give myself _____ for my performance.

Appendix D

Communicative Competence Rubric

Category (Maximum)	Criteria	Points
Fluency (7)	Able to communicate ideas clearly. Able to speak smoothly and naturally without hesitation or long pauses.	<p>7 - Spoke smoothly and communicated ideas clearly.</p> <p>5 - Some pauses but able to communicate ideas.</p> <p>3 - Many pauses, not many ideas communicated.</p> <p>1 - Long silence/spoke Japanese.</p>
Accuracy (5)	Able to use correct grammar, pronunciation and sentence structures when speaking.	<p>5 - Excellent control of grammar and pronunciation, few errors.</p> <p>3 - Good control of grammar and pronunciation, some errors.</p> <p>1 - Unsatisfactory control of grammar and pronunciation, many errors.</p>
CS (3)	Can use (rejoinder, how about you, shadowing) effectively and appropriately to expand conversations	<p>3 - Used it 3 times appropriately.</p> <p>2 - Used it 2 times appropriately.</p> <p>1 - Used it 1 time appropriately.</p>
Follow-up questions (4)	Can ask follow up questions effectively and appropriately to extend conversation	<p>4 - Asked 4 appropriate questions.</p> <p>3 - Asked 3 appropriate questions.</p> <p>2 - Asked 2 appropriate questions.</p> <p>1 - Asked 1 appropriate question.</p>