

# Framework to Improve Spoken Discourse in Task-Based Learning

Jason Pipe

## Abstract

Much evidence exists indicating the effectiveness of task-based learning. However, it has become clear that such an approach does not necessarily facilitate second language acquisition if the classroom is not properly managed. Students may fail: to participate in much meaning negotiation; to develop their own interlanguage systems; to build confidence in trying out communication strategies or language; or to place less reliance on their first language. This paper looks at how the framework, Timed Pair Practice, can motivate the learner to become more competent in a second language at Kyoritsu University. It will become apparent that this additional procedure to task-based learning may enable the learner to: become more aware of the importance in communicating effectively; build confidence in trying out communication strategies or language; develop a more autonomous learning environment; and place less reliance on using their first language to express themselves.

## Introduction

English courses for non-natives can benefit from a task-based learning approach. Reflecting on current teaching trends, this form of learning can enable students to focus on all of the components of communicative competence, and provide them with opportunities to naturally acquire a second language (Richards and Rodgers 2001) rather than overusing unnatural pre-selected target structures commonly taught at high school. However, classroom management issues may arise that could affect how students cultivate their language resources. This paper will look at particular problems that could occur through task-based learning, and introduce the framework Timed Pair Practice (TPP) as a classroom tool to improve conversational competency within the pedagogical rationale of task-based learning.

After close observation of the manner in which tasks have been completed, it has become clear that this strong communicative approach does have its setbacks, especially for low-leveled speakers of English. It was found that task-based learning does not necessarily facilitate L2 acquisition (Swan 2005). Students were able to succeed in performing a task successfully without the need to participate in much meaning negotiation or the need to attend to linguis-

tic form (Swain and Lapkin 1995). With emphasis on fluency over accuracy, students failed to stretch their interlanguage systems by drawing on their limited lexicalized system to complete tasks (Baleghizadeh 2012). Risk adverse students, therefore, failed to build confidence in trying out communication strategies or language, and, furthermore, they were unable to benefit from how others expressed similar meanings. Often was the case that students resorted to the comfort of their first language to express themselves. This experience can have a serious affect on the student's attitude towards learning another language and the learning environment as a whole (Williams and Burden). The overall success of the task depends on the learners' active personal involvement with the task

It follows that to create meaningful and potentially motivating tasks, it is necessary to introduce a framework into the classroom that not only nurtures a more autonomous learning environment but also contributes in developing communicative effectiveness, and promoting accuracy and complexity in language. Students need to be better orientated toward the benefits of task-based learning. Timed Pair Practice (TPP) could provide a possible solution.

### **Timed Pair Practice Procedure**

After completing coursework tasks already set in the curriculum, the students are introduced to this new procedure through the practice stage followed by the evaluation stage. The main premise of this approach is that each student will be motivated by how they perceive their paired conversation will be evaluated in the final stage. This will be determined by aspects such as the length of a student's conversation, accuracy, relevancy and timeliness of responses. However, in terms of second language acquisition, the practice stage that precedes the evaluation stage becomes the integral part of the learning process. Concern about their individual performance in the evaluation causes students to become more focused on completing and practicing the tasks to the best of their ability, and consequently have a much more varied and personal exposure to language.

Incorporating this framework into the classroom is quite simple as there is no additional work required by the teacher. They simply follow the same coursework and encourage students to become familiar with the language structures, vocabulary and contents introduced in the course task-based materials. However, in the practice stage, students have to cultivate their language resources by generating conversation that was passively learnt in their coursework. The dynamics of the class consequently change. Instead of being complacent and relying on safer and limited range of language forms to complete tasks, students push for much meaning negotiation by developing their interlanguage systems. In the final evaluation, students are randomly paired and come to the front of the class to converse about the task in hand. Once an issue on accuracy, relevancy or speed arises, the paired conversation is stopped and the duration is recorded. Once everyone has had an opportunity to be evaluated, students are randomly paired and evaluated again. This process continues throughout the les-

son. During the evaluation stage, other students listen to the paired conversations of those being evaluated so they can benefit on how others express similar meanings, what fossilized mistakes are occurring, and other communicative strategies used.

## Class Dynamics

Two classes were chosen to determine the effectiveness of TPP for my research. They were both level 2 (mid-intermediate) with 22 girls in one group (class A) and 27 in the other (class B). They were all first year students and had been learning English for at least six years. Although, their English level had been determined by their results from the TOEIC Bridge examination, a closer assessment was required to assess their actual spoken English ability and their true potential.

In order to do this and develop a better understanding of each student's confidence and motivation, a questionnaire was provided at the beginning of the course. It became apparent that students' confidence in speaking English was quite low. Although there were occasional comments written by some about a genuine desire to improve their spoken English, the overall response seemed to suggest that the majority of pupils in class A did not enjoy speaking English while those in class B class felt indifferent. Around half of each class felt that they could not talk about topics they wanted to talk about, and that two-thirds felt uncomfortable speaking English only and that they needed to use their own language. Closer analysis seemed to show that students felt inadequate in making questions and responding appropriately. Although there was an overall acknowledgement in class B to try to improve in these areas, class A did not seem to place such importance in trying to improve in these areas. However, both groups agreed that it was necessary to practice more inside the classroom. Interestingly, virtually all students seemed less enthusiastic in practicing English taught outside the classroom. It would seem that there was a high degree of dependence placed on the presence of the teacher, especially to ensure better student involvement when participating in tasks, and to raise more awareness in directing each student on issues of accuracy.

Understanding these issues made it evident to reorient students to 'the basic function of the classroom, the role of the students and the nature of language' (Deckert: 1987: 20). At high school, the lessons appeared to be teacher-led in that students were directed through coursework to focus the student on passing the university entrance examination. Hence in the preliminary questionnaire, there was a less than positive response in the overall self-evaluation in their ability to converse. At university, through the TPP framework, classes were designed to be less teacher-centred. Especially during the practice stage, students were free to contribute their own ideas and experiences while completing tasks with other students without the supervision of the teacher. Each student had the opportunity to focus on their own personal experiences and practice areas of language they deemed as important. The production of language and the attention to language form at this stage was essential to prepare each

individual for the final stage of TPP in which students were evaluated by the length of their conversation.

## Hypothesis

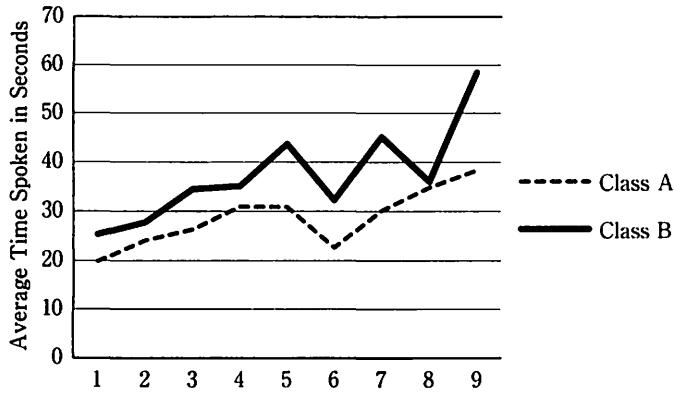
It will become apparent that the application of the TTP framework in task-based learning may enable the learner to become more aware of the importance in communicating effectively and accurately. Task-based learning often depends too much on positive evidence of completing the tasks and ignores the role of negative evidence in second language teaching. Ungrammatical forms remain uncorrected, which can be detrimental to L2 acquisition and not efficient in producing successful L2 learners (Ellis and Sheen). The learner would benefit from negative evidence in second language teaching to compensate for the lack of acquisitional mechanisms which children acquiring their L1 have (Felix 1985, Schachter 1989, White 1991). Reactive focus on form, which occurs when a learner has said something erroneous and the teacher reacts to this error by correcting her, is a good source of supplying learners with negative evidence (Ellis et al., 2001b: 285). By bringing attention to issues of grammar, it is hoped that students can become more aware of the importance in speaking accurately and effectively.

Furthermore, through this additional procedure, students will begin to build confidence in trying out communication strategies or language to extend and deepen conversation. In this experimental process, as students naturally develop their interlanguage systems, they will also place less reliance on using their first language to express themselves which will lead to a more autonomous learning environment. As a consequence, through this framework, it is hoped that students can genuinely adopt a more positive approach to learning English and feel more capable about their own English conversational abilities.

## Research Analysis

From the beginning of the term, each student seemed to be able to fulfill basic communicative tasks, and ask and answer questions although many of them felt uncomfortable without resorting to their first language. Furthermore, students had difficulty relating to the topics used in the coursework to actual personal experiences. Particularly with class A, there was a limitation in their production of language due to insufficient vocabulary and a lack of creative confidence to experiment with target language taught. There appeared to be a process of passive learning deeply rooted in the students' L2 learning psychology. As a result, students were able to complete with a limited degree of success the tasks set in the textbook but found it challenging to apply the target structure or topic themes taught to activities outside the scope of the course materials.

However, during the academic year, it became apparent that students were gradually



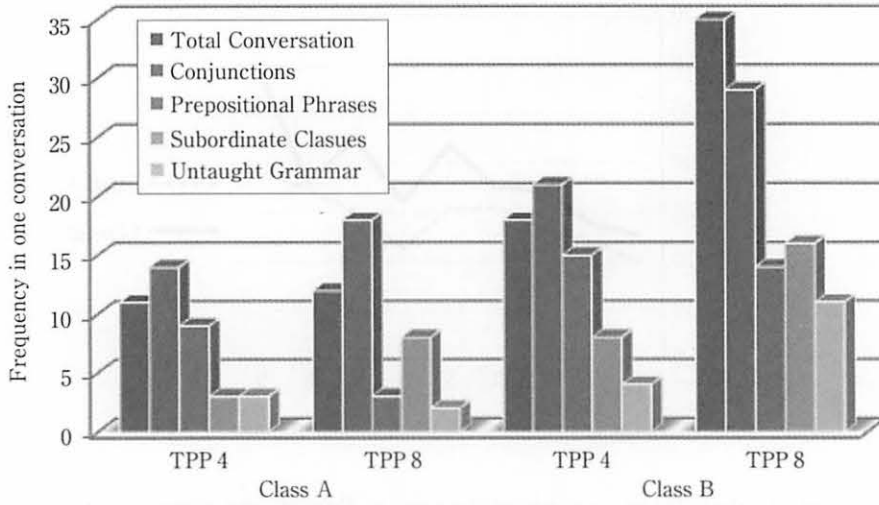
Class Average Conversation in the Evaluation Stage of TPP

able to re-orientate their learning approach to acquire English and communicate more effectively. After an analysis of empirical data concerning student performance during the semester, it became increasingly clear that students were able to converse in English for longer periods of time. In the final stage of TPP, each student seemed to be more motivated and able to take longer turns in the conversation. By keeping record of the length of each student's conversation, with attention to accuracy, relevancy and timeliness of responses, the average length of each student's conversation was established.

Though the yearly term, it became apparent that each student was able to improve the quality and length of their conversation. In fact, through the course of the nine monthly evaluation stages, the class average conversation doubled in length (refer to the diagram below).

Except in evaluation 6, class A constantly improved in the length of their conversation from 20 seconds in the first tested observation to 38 seconds by the final evaluation. Class B also spoke at greater length from 25 seconds in the first observation to 58 seconds by the final evaluation. However, class B was not able to maintain this average length in evaluation 6 and 8. This can be attributed by the complexity of the target language compounded by the tasks set that were in areas outside the interest of the students. Evaluation 6 was reflecting on government issues and evaluation 8 looked at economic trends. However, overall, class performance in the evaluation stage would demonstrate a better awareness by students to focus on form and improve their accuracy.

However, there was not only improvement in the length of conversation in the TPP evaluation. English spoken during the practice stage and regular coursework classes had much improved in quality. In preparation for the fourth (TTP 4) and eighth (TT 8) evaluation, students were asked to record a two-minute conversation. By using the voice recorder application from their smartphones, dialogues could be transcribed word-for-word. From this data (refer to the diagram below), it was possible to evaluate their performance and look closer at strategies used by students in both class A and B in order to prepare them for TPP 4 and TPP 8. It became apparent that they were able to increase the number of sentences in each



Class Average Conversation in the Evaluation Stage of TPP

turn. On average, class A was only able to increase the number of sentences per two-minute conversation slightly from 11 (TPP 4) to 12 (TPP 8). Class B, however, was able to double the number of sentences used in their conversation from 18 to 35 respectively. This would demonstrate better interaction within the two-minute conversation. Furthermore, each class naturally adopted strategies to lengthen each sentence. It was found that each class used more conjunctions and experimented with more subordinate clauses. Class A increased the number of conjunctions on average from 14 (TPP 4) to 18 (TPP 8) while class B increased the use of conjunctions from 21 to 28 respectively. The frequency of subordinate clauses doubled in use in both classes. It would also show how students had become more confident in their ability to elaborate in conversation by pushing themselves to maintain relevant and timely responses.

Such improvement can be attributed to better orientation to completing tasks during the practice stage. This stage seemed to have more impact and relevance on the acquisition of a second language. Overall, students became more aware of the importance of communicating effectively and accurately through meaningful negotiation in order to improve their time in the TPP evaluation. In fact, during this evaluation, it was found that students were able to incorporate not only coursework vocabulary and language structures into the conversation but other untaught language too. This would suggest a more natural development in students following a self-discovery approach to completing tasks. Also, confidence had been built when trying out communication strategies or language during the practice stage and putting them to affect in the final evaluation. Student surveys would also appear to support these claims. In fact, it became clear that students felt that their English ability to converse had improved and their own perception over their ability to self-improve linguistically also seemed positive although there was a general consensus that the teacher played an important role to ensure accuracy was maintained.

## Conclusion

Overall, task-based learning through the TPP framework had been a rewarding experience as it had brought better awareness of accuracy and built confidence in trying out communication strategies or language. Students were also able to benefit from how others expressed similar meanings. Consequently, students rarely resorted to the comfort of their first language to express themselves as they became more confident in their own speaking ability and they understood the importance to stretch their own lexicalized system to complete tasks in order to acquire a second language.

With the emphasis for graduates needing to possess excellent English communication ability, it is necessary for the learner to cultivate their language resources to the best of their ability through task-based learning. However, in order to ensure that students can actively be engaged in acquiring a second language, task-based learning has to be successfully managed. The introduction of the TPP framework could prepare students to perform a task more effectively. The framework has the potential to give students opportunities to understand their true abilities and teach them what they need to function more effectively and naturally in speaking tasks. This experience would build student confidence, self-esteem, and autonomy.

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