TBLT in Asia 2024 Conference Review

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The Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) in Asia 2024 Conference took place at Meijo University in Nagoya, Japan, from the 5th to the 7th of July 2024. TBLT is a natural extension of the communicative language approach, with a focus on using real-world tasks as the primary method for language learning. It emphasizes meaning over form and aims to develop learners' communicative abilities through tasks that simulate real-life language use.

I decided to attend this conference to deepen my understanding of TBLT, and to further my professional development. Unfortunately, due to time and budgetary constraints, I was only able to go on one day. As such, I focused on attending presentations that were most relevant to my teaching context, particularly those that focused on the integration of TBLT in academic English settings. What follows are the highlights from the sessions that I went to on the Saturday of the conference.

The first presentation on Saturday morning was by Ellie Law from Hong Kong Baptist University, entitled "From Texts to Paragraphs – Crafting Academic Arguments Through Collaborative Tasks." After outlining her context, she highlighted common issues faced by students in Hong Kong who find academic writing challenging, such as problems involving incoherent paragraphs, direct translation from their L1, and a lack of clarity when expressing their ideas.

Law's focus was on how she had designed collaborative tasks aimed at improving students' abilities to construct more persuasive body paragraphs within their academic essays. The tasks involved reading an academic text, then exchanging information through a speaking activity, and finally collaboratively writing a body paragraph that cited relevant research. What I learned from this presentation was that tasks should involve different modes of work, topics should be engaging and align with students' interests, and course designers should attempt to develop the 21st-century skills of collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. I found the session's focus on collaborative academic tasks particularly relevant to my context, as my students also struggle with creating coherent arguments by themselves. I plan to experiment with similar collaborative writing tasks in my own classroom.

The next presentation, by Peter Lutes from Kagawa University's Faculty of Agriculture, was entitled "Enhancing EFL Learning Through Task-Based Learning." This workshop outlined teaching and planning strategies aimed at improving the motivation of English learners through the implementation of Task-Based Learning related to their academic interests. For me, the key takeaway from this presentation was the importance of making sure that students completely understand the reasons behind what they are doing. For example, students engaged in designing a poster for an academic presentation should fully grasp the purpose of the poster before starting the design. The implementation of this initial phase is key; otherwise, there is a danger that learners may engage in tasks mindlessly. Towards the end of the presentation, Lutes offered useful tips on engaging successfully with generative AI models – including some anecdotal evidence to suggest that politeness is important when keying in your instructions. As someone who has recently begun to use AI models to support my work, I found his recommendations valuable for maximizing their potential.

Later that morning, I attended the plenary session given by Shoko Sasayama from Waseda University related to using evidence-based task design for effective language education. In this talk, she shared findings from her recent research on the role of task design in second language contexts.

Sasayama described how educators can intentionally manipulate the levels and types of cognitive demands of a task by changing design characteristics, thereby influencing learners' production, comprehension, interaction, and learning. I learnt the importance of having a clear goal when designing tasks. Once a clear task goal has been established, teachers can adjust the cognitive complexity of the task by changing design characteristics, implementation conditions and language demands. The idea of adjusting cognitive complexity based on task goals was something I hadn't fully considered before. I will be more mindful of this in the future, particularly when planning tasks for students of differing ability levels.

Following the plenary session, I attended a presentation entitled "Driven Competencies: A Holistic Approach to Academic English" by Robert Cochrane. Working in a context similar to my own, he outlined some all-too-familiar issues associated with Japanese learners, such as low English proficiency, a paucity of critical thinking ability, insufficient tech skills, passivity, and an overall lack of engagement. He posited that rather than the fault lying with the students, it was that the educational needs of 21st-century learners are not being met due to antiquated teaching materials and techniques.

Cochrane cited several problems, such as boring textbooks, a lack of productive activities, a focus on receptive tasks, and segmented, teacher centered L1 instruction. It was his view that a new, more holistic paradigm is required at the university level that allows for learning other academic competencies beyond English, such as critical thinking, research skills, and peer collaboration. This presentation had a particular impression on me, as I see many of the same issues in my own teaching context. I tend to agree with Cochrane that that many students' problems stem more from outdated materials and approaches, as opposed to a lack of effort. His approach made me consider the need to incorporate more critical thinking and collaborative tasks into my own teaching.

Next, continuing the coursebook theme touched on in Cochrane's presentation, was the afternoon plenary session entitled "Coursebook-based TBLT: An Oxymoron?" by Jonathon Newton from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Presenting a balanced view of coursebooks, he set out by stating the case against them. He felt that coursebooks perpetuate "synthetic" syllabi that focus too much on grammar and lead to an overly teacher-centered approach. After this critique, he noted that many teachers in Asia have no choice but to use mandated texts. He suggested that the best way forward was to give teachers agency and the training they need to use textbooks in better, more effective ways. For example, if teachers were to be shown how to "taskify" activities in mandatory coursebooks, then they would be able to add value and help their English learners. This concept was useful for me as I also rely on mandated textbooks for some courses that I teach. I am now considering ways to adapt coursebook activities to make them more task-like and engaging.

The final presentation I attended was by Rod Ellis and Natsuko Shintani, titled "Measuring Pragmatic Competence Using Roleplays: A Genre-based Approach." This session outlined the use of role-play tasks as an assessment tool. Whilst previous studies had used conversation analysis to identify key pragmatic features, the presenters used a genre-based approach. The presenters developed a points-based scoring system benchmarked on proficient English speakers' role-play performance. This system assessed

basic elements that were deemed essential for the problem-solution pattern, as well as optional elements that were felt not to be essential but added pragmatic value. One advantage of the system was said to be that it could help to identify pragmatic features to be used in pedagogic instruction. The disadvantage was the time required to develop a new rating system for each role-play. The presenters concluded by stating the usefulness of a genre-based approach in role-play tasks for both testing and teaching. Overall, I found their approach to assessing pragmatic competence particularly enlightening, and I may consider adding role-play tasks to my assessments to better evaluate students' real-world communication skills.

In conclusion, attending the Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) in Asia 2024 Conference was a valuable experience, though I regret not being able to attend more sessions. I was particularly struck by the unity of belief among the presenters, with everyone seemingly convinced that TBLT offers the most effective path forward in language education. Their confidence in the approach and their enthusiasm for extolling its virtues certainly left an impression. However, despite this enthusiasm, several important challenges were also brought to light. For example, the time required to design tasks and the complexities of creating effective assessments are key areas that I will need to consider when implementing TBLT in my own context.

About the Author

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