The Effect of Task-Based Learning on Undergraduates' Communication Skills in Technical Subject
TBL を用いた 学生のための実践的コミュニケーションスキル 向上に関する研究

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In the era of globalization, graduates strive to equip with not only hard skills in their professional field, but also the soft skills, one of which is the ability to communicate in different languages. Universities play a significant role in producing graduates that meet the job market requirements, which ultimately enables them to compete globally. Nowadays, technical subjects, also known as workforce-related subjects are taught in English to the undergraduates. By offering the technical subject in English, it is intended to create more opportunities for English usage among the undergraduates. Task-Based Learning is a method that provides students with the natural context to communicate in the target language. As the students work to solve the task, they gain opportunities to talk, and such interaction is part of the language acquisition where students put an effort in understanding the group and expressing their ideas.

Keywords: Task-Based Learning, skills, oral communication rubric, global management, quasi-experimental study

Ⅰ．Introduction

The acquisition of the global communication language skills has become necessary along with the globalization. For the Japanese, the English language has emerged as the foreign language which is taught and studied in the country. However, the acquisition of this foreign language to a high level of fluency remained elusive (Parsons & Caldwell, 2015). Undergraduates are the products of the higher education institution. The primary responsibility of universities and colleges is to

produce marketable graduates holistically and compatible in the world of globalization. Graduates from universities, nowadays, are required to be skillful in their expertise and also to be able to work well with the system. Hence, communication skills and social skills are vital. Communication skills have become an important subject that universities work on in implying it into the undergraduates. Globalising forces and the unprecedented mobility of capital, goods, and people across borders requires the ability to interact in a variety of inter-cultural and cross-cultural scenarios (Parsons & Caldwell, 2015). The application of generic skills is also one of the important roles played by the University. Communication skills are one of the components in the generic skills. Excellent communication skills play a significant role in ensuring the success of an organization. Recognizing the importance of communication skills is one of the key features of the holistic development of the undergraduates, most Universities provide various programs, courses, training, workshops, lectures and various activities that were aim at inculcating good communication skills within the institutions. Communication skills especially in English is a complex subject and includes skills not only in communication itself but also motivation, emotion, self-confidence, rational attitude and behavior. The development of communication skills in English in Universities was often embedded in the curriculum of business courses, entrepreneurship, trade, and management. The activities, projects, academic subjects are imposed with this human skill as part of the effort to produce marketable graduates. The university organizes projects and activities that are aimed to equip the undergraduates with expertise and knowledge in their field, and the sociability of the undergraduates in enhancing their competitive edge in the job market either in Japan or internationally. As English has become the leading language of international trade and business interaction, Japan needs more citizens to be able to communicate in English. An enormous amount of time and resources are devoted to improve this language communication skills. However, most of the Japanese graduates are still underprepared to work in the globalized world when it comes to the communication ability in English. Studies have shown that low-level proficiency students face difficulties in expressing themselves using correct and simple sentences, they are reluctant to communicate mainly in English as they have poor speaking skills as they seldom or do not need English in their daily life environment (Ismaili, 2012).

Skills Development

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology stated the need for improvement in the level of English proficiency of the undergraduates in universities. Indeed, not only Japan, many East Asian countries have been working for more communicative approaches towards English

Language Communication Skills. The traditional methods of English Language Learning which focusing on translating and memorizing has led to the lack of oral proficiency of the graduates; the universities in Japan, the teaching approaches is focusing more on improving the undergraduate's communicative competence and speaking skills (Thompson & Millington, 2012).

　The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is working on the perceived problems in English language education. The traditional teaching method lacks the communicative input and output. Communication skills are one of the components in the Generic Skills. There are many terms used to define the Generic Skills. The Ministries and Agencies Advocate in Japan identified the Generic Skills in various ways. The Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry set Generic Skills as the fundamental skills for social workers. The Cabinet Office defined it as the human capabilities. The definitions of the Generic Skills are shown in table 1.

Table 1 Generic Skill definition of Ministry Department in Japan

The Cabinet Office Human Power	The Generic Skills is defined as the general ability for constructing and managing society and living ideally as a self-sustaining individual. It is defined that by enhancing the comprehensive and well-balanced factors such as intellectual ability and social and interpersonal relationship, it will lead to the productive human power.	
METI Fundamentals of social workers	In 2006, it was proposed by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry's, the "Study Group on Fundamentals of Social Workers," which is the core ability that is necessary to work in the diversified society. It is developed into three categories with 12 skills, "Power to step forward" "Power to think out" "Power to work in the team".	
Central Education Council (Bachelor Graduates)	Presented from four perspectives: "knowledge/understanding" "general skills" "attitude/orientation" "integrated learning experience and creative thinking ability. A knowledge-based society that globalizes and a learning community refers to the power of what a bachelor degree holder is required for.	
Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology	Employability	After graduation, students are needed to improve their talents and to achieve independence in society and their professions. It is important to have students acquire the employability skills that lead to social independence from the university.
	Career education Generic Skills	The four areas of 8 capabilities that the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology mentioned as the "various skills related to career development." "Human relationship formation / social formation ability", "self-understanding / self-management ability", "ability to deal with tasks", and "career planning ability".

The skills development that defined by each ministry and agency is also part of the mission of the University. However, it was hard to put the theories into the practice. The application of the method that shows kinds of activities and lessons in the university that involved with the skills development is subjective. Besides, the level of the student's achievement in the communication skills is also hard to be evaluated. According to Negishi & Tono (2014), there is still room for improvement of the English language of the undergraduates in Japan. The method applied offers students the opportunity to engage in precisely the situation that they will likely come across in the globalized work-place after their graduations, such as sharing information and communicating with the co-workers or outsiders (Parsons & Caldwell, 2010).

Unlike language learning courses, technical subjects require high comprehension of the content. The experience of delivering technical subject fully in English has faced difficulties in achieving a positive learning outcome of the particular course. Not only the level of English communication skills does not improve, but also the majority of students are not able to comprehend the content of the lessons. Many of the educators find it challenging to develop the English language fluency among most of the undergraduates who carry an average to poor scores in the English language since the school years. This result from various factors, such as lack of confidence to speak using foreign language; fear of making mistakes, or limitation of English language background itself. When English is taught for testing purposes, it is unavoidable that the learners are provided with enormous grammar and vocabulary lessons that will prepare them for the test. These practices lead to the neglecting of the practical use of English as a communication tool, and broader understanding of this foreign language. Learners tend to study and memorize the language for the sake of passing the tests. English is regarded as the language of science and the international means of communication. Being able to comprehend and communicate in this language will benefit the graduates to take part in the world of globalization.

There are many studies of Task-Based Language Learning (TBL) that have been conducted by the academics. The effectiveness of this method on improving the communication skills has been one of the interesting areas to study. However, research on the effectiveness of Task-Based Learning (TBL) on the technical subjects that are taught in English is limited. There are plenty of studies within Asian contexts have proven on how oral tasks is possible to apply in various ways to improve the student's communication skills (Thompson & Millington, 2012). Students need to generate their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, work in the team while using the language to communicate. As most of the Japanese students have limited exposure to practice English in their daily life, Task-Based Learning can offer them the opportunity in developing their

communication skills in English (Ismaili, 2012).

Objective

Task-Based Learning is mostly applied on the language learning classes, and there are many pros and cons responses towards this method on the Japanese EFL context. This study is interested in understanding whether low-level students would find a content-rich, task-based approach to the foreign language learning meaningful and motivating. It is an attempt to determine if there is a way to improve low-level students' communication skills in English.

Is this method suitable to apply on the undergraduates with the beginner level of English accuracy in learning technical subjects in English? Can this approach somehow help to improve the communication skills of the undergraduates?

This study is aimed to determine the effect of TBL in improving the communication skills of the undergraduates who are taking the Global Management subject.

Significance of the study

This small-scale study will determine how English proficiency low-level students perceive the application of Task-Based Learning in their communication activities. The result will provide an insight to the teacher to refer when it comes to the full English class to the beginners. The study attempts to understand the student's attitudes towards this method.

Research Question:

What is the effect of the Task-Based Learning (TBL) on the students' communication skills?

Ⅱ. Review of Literature

Task-Based Learning is not a new teaching and learning method in the language learning context. There are many active and adverse responses both from the educators and learners. The advantages and disadvantages of this approach have been studied for many years, and the applicability of this method on different characteristics of students remains questionable.

EFL teachers seek to look for the meanings, activities, and tasks to help the students to achieve their goals in communication using the foreign language; students understand that the limitation of the vocabulary and grammatical rules will affect their communication skills (Chalak, 2015).

According to Mesbah (2016), the Task-Based approach is a technique that does not engage the learners in the form-focused activities. Instead, this method requires the students to perform communicative tasks. The students are expected to express their ideas about the content of the lesson. Perhaps wouldn't be easy especially for the EFL students, where English is not their first language. However, the process of cultivating the global graduates, communication skills in the different language is a vital area that needs more attention. Samuda and Bygate (2008) explained that Task-Based Learning as contexts where tasks are the central unit of the instruction; it leads the classroom activities. Willis (1996) defined the term task as an activity where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose while solving the problem. A framework of the Task-Based Learning from Willis (1996) is as below;

Pre-Task
－ Instructor introduces topic and the task
Task cycle
－ Task
 ○ Students carry out the task
－ Planning
 ○ Students plan how to report on task outcome
－ Report
 ○ Students report back to class
－ Language focus
 ○ Analysis
 ○ Practice

Willis also defines the eight purposes of Task-Based Learning, which are;

1. to provide students the confidence to use the target language
2. to provide students the experience of spontaneous interaction in the target language
3. to offer students the chance to understand how others express meanings in the target language
4. o offer students opportunity to negotiate in the group
5. to engage students in using the target language purposefully
6. to get the students to participate in the competition for interaction
7. to provide students to try their communication strategies
8. to develop the students 'confidence in communicating

Nunan (2004) defined that the Task-Based approach is to provide the learners with the environment and experiment to explore both spoken and written language through learning activities, which are designed to engage students in the authentic, practical and functional use of the language for meaningful purposes. With this, learners are encouraged to be activated and use the language in the process of completing a given task. Figure below describes the Task-Based Language Teaching framework designed by Nunan (2004)
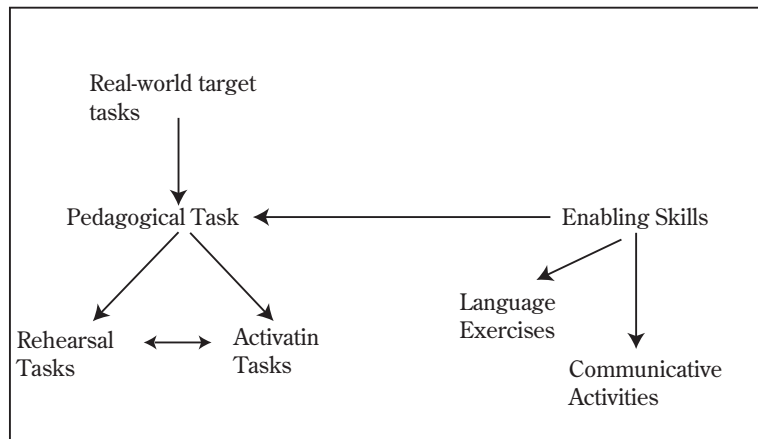
Framework for TBLT, Nunan(2004)

According to Parsons & Caldwell (2010), the problem-solving and Task-Based method requires the students to be active and participate in the construction of knowledge by developing metacognitive learning strategies and working in small groups. It is different than the traditional language teaching in Japan which focuses on the absolute answer of grammatical rules, and this method does not have a clear answer for the task.

Willis & Willis (2007) suggested that the most efficient way to help language learners to improve in the language is by engaging them to the real-life scenario. For example, problem-solving, group discussion, task completion, group presentation, case studies, etc. Where to complete the task given, learners would need to use the language that they are learning. The primary objective of most language programmes is to prepare the students to communicate in the target language; however, most of the students are reluctant to express either inside or outside of the classroom. (Wang & Erlam, 2011). As like the definition from Ellis (2005), students learn the language better when they have the opportunity to use the language. What is a task? Ellis (2003) defined task as cognitive processes of a work plan which involves the primary focus on meaning and the real-world processes of language use. A task might need any or all of the four language skills.

The practice of this method, however, is questioned by many academicians in Japan especially in the EFL context in Japan. Sato (2009) argues that after some careful examination of the meaning of English in the Japanese context, it shows that Task-Based Learning is not suitable for the Japanese EFL learners where they could not produce output as expected from the theories.

TBL in a Japanese EFL context

Dickinson (2010) in his paper, mentioned about many arguments of the Task-Based Learning method especially of its outcomes concerning of improving the communication skills. Bruton (2002) and Swan (2005) disagreed about the suitability of this approach for the low-level learners as it lacks both theoretical and empirical support. This method seems as unsuitable for the learning styles and expectations of Japanese students. Task-Based Learning is not recommended if learners have no immediate need to use the language outside of the classroom; and this method might demotivate the Japanese students whose primary focus in on preparing for examination (Sato, 2009). Japanese students learn the English language through the Grammar Translation Method, which is also known as yakudoku; and they are trained to memorize the rules of the language for the examination purpose. The traditional way of teacher-centered provides little opportunity for the students to engage with the language in a communicative way (Parson & Caldwell, 2010). Nevertheless, the communication skills using the foreign language is still room for improvement in this country. Positive points from Ellis (2009) about the Task-Based Learning were made upon the beginner learner of English Language. Interactions involve in this method will benefit the beginner students as it encourages them to improve their capacity and get the most out of their resources. TBL arise not only output prompting, but also can act as the input-providing. Ellis theory is also the base of this research. Students with limited language accuracy at the university level, traditionally go through some communications classes. Applying TBL into one of the technical subjects that they are learning is hope to connect the language learning motivation to the knowledge. The task is designed focusing on the scientific theories that they are learning, solving the task problem given and presenting the output in the foreign language is hope to be able to increase the motivation level of the students.

As Ellis (2009) claims that TBL also helps the input-based approaches, students will be able to develop not only the ability to comprehend the input but also the grammatical resources they will need to speak and write. Learners with limited grammar skills can communicate effectively in a foreign language as TBL can help to develop their grammar system by offering opportunities to utilize the resources that they have. Indeed, there are many successful cases of applying TBL

onto the lower-level learners, and the results of the studies showed that the method is beneficial to the communication development. For most of the Japanese students, their only interaction using English perhaps occurs in the English classroom. However, there are some motivated students who eager in practicing the language to improve their skills. Even having the six years of English classes in their school, most of the Japanese students leave their school with insufficient communicative skills, Dickson (2010). The lacking of the ability continues to the student's university level. From the hypotheses made by Wang & Erlam (2011), having students to work on the given task and solve the problem towards the outcome will motivate them to communicate in the target language. The reason for the changes in communication skills is related to the opportunity to converse in pairs and small group contexts; it could reduce the communication anxiety.

Ⅲ．Methodology

This article reports the results of an experimental study, which is being conducted to find out the effectiveness of Task-Based Learning (TBL) approach in teaching Global Management course to the undergraduate's students. The study is being conducted from the beginning of the new semester in April 2017 and is completed by the end of the first half of the semester in July. This study focused on the students enrolled in a business-oriented faculty of a private university in Japan. The English level of the students is low.

Students will take the responsibilities for their learning progress; they will first engage with the task using the knowledge they have and collaborate in groups to understand what they lack to solve the task given. The teacher will act as the facilitator in the class. Students will interact with one and another to share the common knowledge that they have, and together look for the solution to the task. The communication skills involve here will see that the students present their ideas, answers in the foreign language. Grammatical rules are not taken into consideration while the students make the presentation. The rationale of this method is hoped to build the students confidence and improve their communication skills in the foreign language. The outcome of this learning process is to see that the students engage in two-way communication with the rest of the members of the group to build consensus on their knowledge and experiences and decision-making (Parsons & Caldwell, 2010).

Procedures and Instruments

Thirty-two undergraduates take part in the study, and they are divided into two groups based on the random sampling. Pre-tests and Post-test of presentation skills are given to both groups at the beginning and at the end of the semester to measure the effect of the Task-Based approach on the student's communication skills. The Business Oral Communication Rubric is taken as an instrument to measure the communication skills of the respondents.

The scores of the pre-test were collected from the beginning of course. Students are asked to conduct a concise oral presentation where the topics are related to the international trades and issues. Each student was given 3 minutes to carry out the presentation and was evaluated using the Oral Presentation Rubric which was adapted from the Anisfield School of Business, Ramapo College of New Jersey. The evaluation criteria include the introduction, voice quality, clarity, quality of conclusion, and others trait of oral communication. The scores of this rubric are divided into three categories;

a. Excellent (5 to 6 points)

b. Acceptable (3 to 4 points)

c. Unacceptable (1 to 2 points)

The full scores of this evaluation form carry a total of 48 points, with a maximum of 6 points score for each of the eight categories. The same grading oral communication rubric was used again in for the post-test. The scores for both pre-test and post-test of each student were compared and the difference between before and after treatment was analyzed to determine the effectiveness of task-based approach towards the students in the technical class.

Fifteen respondents represent the experimental group exploiting the task-based activities, and the other fifteen represent the control group taking the regular lessons following the lecturer's instructions. To enhance the learning process, the instructor took into consideration the usage of both Task-Based Language Teaching and Grammar-Translation Method. As for the control group, the primary focus is to have the respondents to go through the lesson learning the grammatical rules and vocabularies. Technical terms are taught through direct translation into their native language. The interaction between instructor and respondents is minimal.

Treatment

The experimental group was given treatment involving task such as group discussion and presentation of the case studies. The control group, on the other hand, has gone through the lesson with traditional teaching activities. After the pre-tests. The experimental group was given the task of

solving case studies and conducted group presentation. Each session was divided into three stages; pre-task, task and post-task wherein each stage, the students were given information on how to complete the tasks. The control group were given materials and did the translation of the materials as the traditional learning method.

This study was conducted for one semester which began in April 2017 and ended in July 2017. The treatment was completed in ten sessions.

The course of Global Management is an elective course, and it is offered to the students from any faculty. The course was conducted in English, including the hand-outs, examinations and teaching materials. It is different than the typical language class as it focuses on technical knowledge of Management. Students who signed up for this course acknowledge the condition of English usage in the course. Regardless of the low-level of English proficiency, students took part in this course as an opportunity to improve their language skills and awareness of the importance of English in the globalized world.

IV. Results Analysis

The students' performance in their communication skills was evaluated through the individual presentations before (pre-test) and after (post-test) the treatment (task-based approach). The scores collected were analyzed. There is no statistically significant difference between the means of the control group and the treatment group. A paired t-test was conducted. As shown in table 1, there is no significant difference between the means of the control group and the treatment group on the pre-test. It indicates both groups were homogeneous concerning the oral communication skills before the treatment.

Table 1: Paired Sample t-test for Control group and Treatment group on pre-test

	Pre-Test Control Group	Pre-test Treatment Group
Mean	22.1875	22.75
Variance	40.1625	45.93333333
Observations	16	16
Pearson Correlation	0.210704703	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	15	
t Stat	-0.272860938	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.788680817	

Table 2: Paired Sample t-test for Control group and Treatment group on post-test

	Post-test Control Group	Post-test Treatment Group
Mean	21.3125	22.75
Variance	31.29583333	45.93333333
Observations	16	16
Pearson Correlation	0.15517302	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	15	
t Stat	-0.71067584	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.488188832	

Table 2 shows the paired sample t-test for the post-test for both control group and treatment group. It can be inferred that there is the difference between the means of the control group and treatment group after the treatment.

Table 3: t-test for Control group and Treatment group on post-test

	Pre-test	Post-test
Mean	22.46875	24.125
Variance	41.74092742	34.62903226
Observations	32	32
Pearson Correlation	0.827365433	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	31	
t Stat	-2.553876069	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.015789136	

Table 3 shows the two means of the control group and treatment group were significantly different. It indicates that there is the significant difference in the students' performance before and after the treatment.

Discussion

The analysis result from the data collected shows that there is a difference between the mean scores for pre-test and post-test evaluation. Although the difference might not seem to be bizarre, the changes of the scores indicated an improvement of the communication skills among the students who received the treatment (task-based approach). As the class is not a language class, students worked hard to understand the content of the subject, and at the same time improve their communication skills in using the English language. The research question for this study is simple, which is to explore the effect of the task-based learning on the student's communication skills. After the ten sessions, the treatment group showed an improvement in their presentations. The results

of the study are expected to support the evidence of task-based learning in teaching the technical subject such as Global Management, where English is the medium of the delivery. As the results show a significant improvement in stimulating the communication skills among the treatment group, Task-Based Learning (TBL) can be considered as a useful tool to achieve positive learning outcomes of the technical subjects that are taught in English. Task-Based Learning focus on conveying meaning as the students will practice the language while solving the tasks; it engages the students to use the language and improve their communication skills in real-world (Chalak, 2015).

Ⅴ. Conclusion

As this was a small-scale study conducted in a private university, a broader future study is recommended for the more robust result. The study is not perfect and lack of external validity. The evaluation for the pre-test and post-test of the student's oral communication performance could be vague as there was no external evaluator. The judgment of the teacher alone could be biased. There is room for improvement during the group discussion such as students' excessive use of mother tongue, the distraction from completing the task, lack of preparation and tendency to read from the notes during the presentation. Students reflections showed that the need for improvement as being incapable to express their ideas and thoughts using appropriate vocabularies.

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