Implementing TBLT in the Japanese Primary EFL Classroom: An Analysis from a Sociocultural Perspective 

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Abstract

With the compliance to the new Course of Study, all 5th and 6th grade primary school students are mandated to receive one weekly Foreign Language Activities (FLA) class for 35 weeks. However, homeroom teachers’ lack of training and confidence about their language skills are some of the issues which remain unresolved. Although the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) provided teaching materials to support the teachers, approaches used in the majority of the classes observed are similar to the traditional styles of teaching; e.g. Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) model. The lack of social engagement has been one of the caveats in the PPP model and this might inhibit the instructional goals to be achieved in FLA lessons. To resolve the issue, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been proposed and investigated in the research of foreign language learning. The present study will examine the process of implementing TBLT in the EFL classroom at a Japanese primary school and the results are further analyzed from a sociocultural perspective.

The definition of ‘task’ in TBLT has been defined by several scholars, and they all aim to provide a solid foundation. Among them the framework proposed by Willis (1996) has been adopted in the present study because of its flexibility and adoptability to the context of English teaching at the primary school. In addition, Willis’ TBLT framework produces a language learning environment via social engagement, problem solving and supportive talk. Since sociocultural theory (SCT) shared many points of connection with TBLT, a TBLT unit was designed and implemented in an elementary school and the social interactions observed in the practice were analyzed from a sociocultural perspective. SCT is a psychological theory of human development and has
been developed from Vygotsky's work that presumes 'the human mind is mediated' (Lantolf, 2000:1). Under SCT, the higher order functions of the human mind develop via interaction with others and with artifacts as the learner participates in socially meaningful activities. SCT has many points of connection and compatibility with TBLT concerning the following three traits in particular: re-contextualization of classroom activity, task as a place for language development, and focus on meaning (Nunn, 2001). We believe the task defined under Willis' TBLT framework produces a language learning environment where children develop by being engaged in social interaction, problem solving, and supportive talk.

Participants in the present study consisted of twenty 5th grade and seven 6th grade students, and all of them had had some experience with English lesson since 3rd grade. Two classes were combined into one and they were further divided into groups based on their fluency. The students worked in groups on a task, Quiz Show, in which they had to create three 3-hint quizzes and present them to the whole class with visual illustrations. Following Willis' framework (three phases: pre-task, task cycle, and language focus), the students were first exposed to a model language use by participating in the samples quizzes presented by the teacher as in pre-task. They then worked in groups, trying to come up with their own quiz hints and answer as in task stage of the task cycle. Visual illustrations and language preparation were done next by the student in planning stage of the cycle and followed by the presentation, which was the final stage (report) of the cycle. Towards the end of the unit, language focus, the teacher reviewed and discussed some examples with the students to withdraw their reflections, and ended the unit by practicing new words that emerged from the task.

The conversational data during the task were collected with audio and video recorders and further transcribed for qualitative analyses from a sociocultural
perspective. Upon careful examination of the data, three major concepts have emerged; scaffolding, collective scaffolding, and mediation by artifacts. Scaffolding, not just any form of help, enables accomplishment that the learners would not have been able to perform on their own and bring them closer to the state of independent competence. Furthermore, scaffolding takes place in both ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ levels. The design of TBLT curriculum itself is a form of macro-level scaffolding, where a specific goal, beyond students’ current capability, was provided. The contingent talk by the teacher, which was observed during the task, provided the micro-level of scaffolding on the spot. The dialogic interaction does not only occur between the teachers and students, but also among students, which was termed as collective scaffolding. It denotes the scaffolding that took place among the students, where everyone engaged mutually and equally to accomplish the goal. The context of the classroom was further enriched via mediation by artifacts. Artifacts provided a common reference point between the teacher and the students, and it is functional only when the teacher’s guidance attuned to the student’s ability.

Dialogic interaction is the common denominator of all three emerged concepts. According to SCT, cognitive and language development takes place first inter- and then intra-psychologically. TBLT will provide excellent opportunities, where dialogical interaction naturally takes place and lead the participants to the internalization of language. Although the results are not still decisive in that students’ second language development took place, and thus further studies are necessary. The present study concludes that the TBLT led to the transformation of classroom talk from traditional patterns of talk to dialogic support from teachers and students for language production, learning, and potential development.
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Chapter 1 Background of the Study

In the recent reform of the mandatory curriculum, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) in Japan revised the Course of Study (MEXT, 2008), and Foreign Language Activities (FLA) has been implemented into 5th and 6th grades. According to the Course of Study, FLA aims to "form the foundation of pupils’ communication abilities through foreign languages." Other objectives such as familiarizing students with the sounds of foreign languages and developing their understanding cultures of foreign countries through experience are also being focused. Although it is called "Foreign Language" Activities, practically speaking, the target language is English. Classes are taught once a week for 35 weeks in 5th and 6th grades by homeroom teachers (HRTs) either with or without the presence of an assistant language teacher (ALT), whose native language is English. One of the most urgent issues in FLA is teacher development. Most of the Japanese homeroom teachers have little experience and are also not well trained in English language teaching. To help teachers conduct lessons, MEXT published two volumes of Eigo Note or "English Notebook" as teaching materials, which are accompanied with teachers’ manuals and electronic materials designed for interactive smart boards in the classroom. Eigo Note contains a variety of language activities including chants, songs and games, and provides communicative activities, in which students use target expressions, interacting with each other and giving a simple presentation to the whole class. The adoption of Eigo Note is prevalent among HRTs and teachers are likely to rely heavily on the teacher’s manual as the main, if not the only, source of reference.

This newly introduced FLA does not mean an early start for junior high school English lessons (Ohashi, 2008). When the lessons are observed, however, a typical
teaching procedure followed in FLA lessons is likely to be similar to the traditional style of teaching; they introduce new vocabulary and expressions to the students, let them repeat until they feel comfortable by using picture cards and chants. In the later stages, then, the students are encouraged to use those learned items in more communicative situations. Since for most of the homeroom teachers this traditional approach of teaching, or Presentation, Practice and Production (PPP), is the most familiar way of learning English and thus it is natural for them to persist with the procedure when they actually teach in the classroom. However, the lack of social engagement between the teacher and the students, also among students, in the PPP approach has been criticized for not fostering language development (Willis & Willis, 2007). To overcome the shortcomings of a traditional PPP lesson, alternative approaches of language teaching have been proposed in language teaching research. Among them is task-based language teaching (TBLT), which has been widely studied and implemented in the classroom (Ellis, 2003). TBLT primarily focuses on meaning and learners' language abilities develop through their engagement in the activity. Within TBLT, achieving the goal of the task is prioritized and it provides a richer social context, allowing interaction to take place more naturally and frequently. Another feature of TBLT is that it allows students to make use of their own linguistic resources and to avoid mechanical rote learning.

The advantage of TBLT cannot be completely understood without a prior understanding of what a 'task' is. In the following chapter, various definitions of task will be laid out and the framework used in this study will also be defined. Also, we will present a theoretical framework, with which the TBLT interaction is examined; that is sociocultural theory. Based on these theoretical frameworks, TBLT lessons, which were done in the Japanese primary EFL classroom, will be briefly described in Chapter
3, followed by an in-depth analysis of the interactions that took place in this study in chapter 4. Finally, discussion and future implication of TLBT in the Japanese primary EFL classroom are presented in the final chapter.
Chapter 2 Task-Based Language Teaching

The definition of task in language learning and the framework adopted in this study are discussed in the following subsections. To understand how participants interact with each other in TBLT activities, then, the analysis of the interaction from a sociocultural perspective will be proposed.

2.1 Definitions of Task in Language Learning in the Literature

The definition of ‘task’ is not quite synchronized among different scholars, as Samuda & Bygate (2008) point out,

while a widely agreed definition of the term desirable and necessary… arriving at such a definition is not straightforward – a considerable part of the second language task literature has been concerned with the search for a precise, yet comprehensive definition of a “task”.

(Samuda & Bygate, 2008, p.62)

Instead of providing a straight forward definition, Ellis (2003) gathered various strands from many of the definitions and created following set of essential criteria for language learning tasks:

1. A task is a workplan.
2. A task involves a primary focus on meaning.
3. A task involves real-world process of language use.
4. A task can involve any of the four language skills.
5. A task engages cognitive processes.
6. A task has a clearly defined communicative outcome.

(Ellis, 2003, p.9-10)

Similarly, Willis and Willis (2009) also provide a set of criteria for determining how ‘task-like’ a given activity is:

A task has a number of defining characteristics, among them: does it engage the learners’ interest; is there a primary focus on meaning; is success measured in terms of non-linguistic outcome rather than accurate use of language forms; and does it relate to real world activities? The more
confidently we can answer yes to each of these questions the more task-like the activity.

(Willis & Willis, 2009, p.4)

A more concise definition pertaining to second language pedagogic task defined by Samuda & Bygate (2008) after carefully consider the task definition literature as:

... a holistic activity which engages language use in order to achieve some non-linguistic outcome while meeting a linguistic challenge, with the overall aim of promoting language learning, through process or product or both.

(Samuda & Bygate, 2008, p.69)

Regardless of whose definition of the task or whether the definition is too broad or restrictive, they all aim to provide a solid foundation, which can be summarized into eight principles (Ellis, 2003), which are necessary to start developing an understanding of task-based teaching.

1. Ensure an appropriate level of task difficulty.
2. Establish clear goals for each task-based lesson.
3. Develop an appropriate orientation to performing the task in the students.
4. Ensure that students adopt an active role in task-based lessons.
5. Encourage students to take risks.
6. Ensure that students are primarily focused on meaning when they perform a task.
7. Provide opportunities for focusing on form.
8. Require students to evaluate their performance and progress.

(Ellis, 2003, p.276-278)

2.2 A TBLT Framework in the Present Study

TBLT is an adaptable approach to language teaching, as Ellis (2009) notes, ‘there is no single way of doing TBLT’ (p.224). Although there is no sole method of TBLT, various designs of TBLT have been proposed and they all generally have three common phases; pre-task, during task, and post-task phases. A TBLT framework proposed by Willis (1996), for example, consists of three phases, pre-task, task cycle, and language focus. In the pre-task phase, teacher explores the topic with the class, highlights some
useful phrases, and helps students understand task instructions. Students could either listen to recordings of the task done by others or experience a similar task prior to the next phase. *Task cycle* phase is further divided into three stages: *task*, *planning*, and *report*. Students would do the task in pairs or small group while the teacher monitors from a distance (*task*). Students then prepare to report on what they have found or decided to the whole class either in written or oral forms (*planning*). Finally, in the last stage of the *task cycle*, *report*, students present their reports to the whole class. *Language focus*, the final phase of the framework, is further supported by *analysis* and *practice*. Students would examine and discuss recent exposures (*analysis*) and the teacher concludes the lesson by conducting practices of new words or phrases that appeared during or after the *analysis* (*practice*).

Willis’ framework coincides with Ellis’ eight principles cited above and is seemingly more flexible and easier to adopt when it comes to teaching beginners, which is the case in our study. As pointed out by Willis (1996, p.118), teacher’s five most important general priorities for beginners are:

1. Establishing a relaxed, anxiety-free atmosphere in the classroom.
2. Providing a lot of exposure that learners can make approximate sense of.
3. Building on what they know, but without expecting perfection.
4. Not forcing them to speak at first if they prefer not to
5. Reassuring them of their progress, and generally boosting their confidence.

Thus adopting Willis’ framework for our study is apparently more age and contextual appropriate for the Japanese primary EFL classroom.

### 2.3 Sociocultural Theory

Considering these features of TBLT, the framework of TBLT looks promising especially in the FLA classroom. However, very little research has yet investigated into
its applicability to language teaching at primary schools. Thus, we would like to know how the TBLT framework fits FLA lessons in the Japanese context and how teachers and students interact with each other during TBLT activities in the FLA classroom. In particular, we would like to observe and analyze the social interaction from a sociocultural theoretical viewpoint. Sociocultural theory (hereafter, SCT) is a psychological theory of human development that draws upon close attention of the social contribution to individual development. SCT has been developed from Vygotsky’s work that presumes ‘the human mind is mediated’ (Lantolf, 2000:1). Under SCT, the higher order functions of the human mind develop via interaction with others and with artifacts as the learner participates in socially meaningful activities. Individuals are drawn into use of cognitive and communicative functions through participation in activities that nurture and scaffold them. Features of SCT, such as scaffolding and mediation, will be further elaborated in Chapter 4.

SCT has many points of connection and compatibility with TBLT concerning these three traits in particular: re-contextualization of classroom activity, task as a place for language development, and focus on meaning (Nunn, 2001). Meaning, for Vygotsky, is determined by the relationship between the structure and interpretation of language and the context in which they appear (Wertsch, 1985). Similarly, for more meaning making as it happens in the real world, tasks are used to re-contextualize the classroom. Vygotsky saw that language and action converged to function in the goal oriented activity of a task, which is consistent with his push for a “need to concentrate not on the product of development but on the very process by which higher forms are established” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.64). Vygotsky also disagreed with focusing on language from stripped from its meaning (Wertsch, 1985, p.88). TBLT’s emphasis on meaning through the use of language has a strong congruence with Vygotsky’s idea of combing language
form with its meaning. We believe task creates conditions for scaffolding and the task defined under Willis' TBLT framework produces a language learning environment where children develop by being engaged in social interaction, problem solving, and supportive talk. It is thus assumed that a TBLT lesson can also be better analyzed from a sociocultural perspective. However, very few studies to date have been conducted to explore social interaction in the primary English lessons under TBLT from a sociocultural perspective. In this paper, thus, we will design and implement a TBLT unit and observe how the students develop within the task, i.e. Quiz Show in our study, and analyze what types of social interactions will take place. Then, we will reveal the ways in which the teachers intervene the interactions and mediates student's learning under the structure of TBLT.
Chapter 3 TBLT Implementation

The context established in this study will be further elaborated, followed by detailed description of the materials and method.

3.1 Context

Lessons based on TBLT were conducted at a suburban primary school located in Hyogo Prefecture, Japan, in November 2010. With less than a hundred students attending this school, there were only seven students in the 6th grade and twenty students in the 5th. All participants had had English lessons since 3rd grade, at least one lesson biweekly in their 3rd and 4th year and one lesson weekly thereafter. Due to time and resource limitations, the two classes were combined into one during their weekly foreign language activity class. For the present study, twenty-seven students were divided into groups of 3-4, where the members consisted of one 6th grader and three or two 5th graders. The homeroom teacher carefully assigned the students into groups to avoid students with good English fluency being clustered in particular groups. During the period, when the present research had been conducted, one instructional unit, made up of four lessons, was collaboratively taught by two homeroom teachers and ALTs, where the author took part as one of the ALTs, from November 5th, 2010 to November 24th, 2010.

3.2 Material and Methods

The main task of the unit was Quiz Show. In this task, each group chose a particular object and described it to the rest of the students, who guessed the object by listening to the descriptions as clues. The unit was divided into four lessons, following
Willis' TBLT framework. In the first lesson, the students participated in a model quiz show prepared by the teachers. This was provided as the pre-task phase, where students were exposed to model language use, which contained expressions particularly useful for the task, such as "Hint number one is …", "It's [adjective]", and "What is it?" Descriptive adjectives, such as "long", "short", "soft", and "hard" were also included in the model quizzes, although they were not explicitly taught. Those expressions were introduced via three sample quizzes given by the teachers. After the model quiz, the students then received instructions on the task, first in English, then in Japanese, including what to expect and how to prepare their quizzes. When each group created three three-hint quizzes similar to the samples presented by the ALT, they used computer print-out graphics and/or hand-drawn picture cards; each of the cards represented a hint and the final card revealed the answer. Also, to avoid the possibility of quiz answers that might be out of ordinary, the topics of the quiz were restricted to the following six categories: sports, home items, school items, main characters, food, and animals. To better illustrate the task, here is an example.

Hint number one, it's a robot.
Hint number two, it's blue and white.
Hint number three, it's a cat.
What is it?
It's Doraemon. (A famous Japanese cartoon character)

Task cycle comes immediately after the pre-task phase, which is further divided into three stages: task, planning, and report. In the task stage, the students worked in groups, determining the quiz answers and hints, and the teachers monitored and, when necessary, helped their work. Students then prepared visual illustrations, in the planning stage, either by using the picture dictionary or the Internet, and they also had to come up with all the necessary language expressions for the presentation. Finally, in the report stage, the students presented their findings (i.e., quizzes) in front of the whole class with
additional audiences from the 4th grade.

The presentations were followed by language focus, which consists of analysis and practice. In the analysis, teachers reviewed some examples, discussed openly with the whole class and also had students reflect on their performance in the quiz shows. Teacher stood in front of the whole class and tried to withdraw the three hints from the students by presenting only the answer card. Students were also asked to share what they have learned throughout this experience to the whole class voluntarily. The teachers then conducted practice with the students by reviewing the new words using quiz hints and answer cards made by the students as the visual cues.
Chapter 4 Analysis of Data

Data were collected by using video and audio equipments for all four lessons and were further transcribed for later qualitative analyses. Extracts of the data shown in the following sections were selected based on the relevance to the social interactions that help students' language development. Upon closer examination and careful interpretation of the collected data, three major concepts emerged from our analysis; scaffolding, collective scaffolding, and mediation by artifacts. In the following sections, we will discuss them in further details.

4.1 Scaffolding

The metaphorical concept of scaffolding derived from the works of Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976), depicting the interactive support that provided by a teacher or peer while learners are in the pursuit of a specific learning activity, one which has finite goals. Throughout the process of scaffolding, a teacher not only helps the student masters a task or concept that the student is initially unable to grasp independently, but also offers assistance with particular skills that are beyond the student’s capability. The main idea is that the student first tries to complete the task as much as possible unassisted and the teacher only attempts to help the student with tasks that are just beyond his/her current capability.

The term scaffolding has been taken up with enthusiasm over the past 20 years and it sometimes used loosely to refer to rather different things (Hammond & Gibbons, 2001). To avoid ambiguity and distinguish ‘scaffolding’ from other form of ‘help’, scaffolding here refers the educationally-relevant formulation of the concept by Maybin, Mercer & Stierer (1992, p.188): “Scaffolding is not just any assistance which helps a
learner accomplish a task. It is help which will enable a learner to accomplish a task which they would not have been quite able to manage on their own, and it is help which is intended to bring the learner closer to a state of competence which will enable them eventually to complete such a task on their own”. The definition gave further interpretation by setting criteria that require some evidence of a teacher wishing to enable a child to develop a specific skill, grasp a particular concept or achieve a particular level of understanding and a learner successfully accomplishing the task with the teacher’s help.

Scaffolding is closely related to Lev Vygotsky’s (1978) idea of zone of proximal development (ZPD). As suggested by Vygotsky, there are two parts of a learner’s development level: the “actual development level” and the “potential developmental level”. ZPD is “the distance between the actual developmental level, as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development, as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978:86). In other words, the ZPD can also be described as the area between what a student can do by him/herself and that which can be achieved with the help of a more knowledgeable other.

Scaffolding is a multilayered process and it goes from ‘global to local’ or ‘macro to micro’ (van Lier, 1996). At the macro-level, the teacher initiates by selecting

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1 While we acknowledge the controversy of linking the concept of scaffolding with ZPD (Lantolf & Thone, 2009; van Lier, 2004), we agree with van Lier (2004) in that good scaffoldings, which satisfy six conditions, including *continuity*, *contextual support*, *intesubjectivity*, *contingency*, *handover/takeover*, and *flow*, should take place within proximal contexts, which is, according to van Lier (2004), what Vygotsky called ZPD.
appropriate activities which create the context and the challenges necessary for students to engage with (Wells, 1999). To ensure that the appropriate challenges are presented to the students, the selection and planning processes for the activities are based on knowledge of the students' cultural and linguistic resources and on the outcome expectations. At the micro-level, the observation of how students take up the presented challenges, individually or collectively, allows the teacher to respond in seemingly effective ways to enable the students to achieve the set goal (Wells, 1999). van Lier (2001) also refers to this form of construct support on the spot as contingent talk. It is at the micro-level that allows the teacher to work with students in their ZPD, where new learning takes place and any challenges are appropriately pitched as Hammond and Gibbons (2001) suggested.

The analysis of the classroom interaction observed in our study showed that the TBLT unit, as designed and carried out, satisfied the preconditions of scaffolding, at macro-level, by providing a specific goal, the Quiz Show, where some elements are beyond the students' current capability; thus, receiving assistance from the teacher was necessary. Teachers also demonstrated their desire for the students both to develop basic English speaking skills via preparing the presentation and to grasp the concept of logical thinking while organizing the quizzes. Finally, the presentation itself exemplifies the successful accomplishment of the task with the teacher's help, where all the groups did present their quizzes independently in the report stage. Moreover, teachers used strategies that provided classroom scaffolding, at micro-level, were also identified throughout the study. The following excerpts will further elaborate on those strategies.

All the conversations in the following excerpts, 1 through 4, occurred in the third lesson prior to the report stage within the task cycle. During the planning stage of the cycle, the students worked in groups and decided on the quiz answers and hints, and the
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teachers circulated around the classroom to provide support when needed².

Excerpt 1: HRT Scaffolding

01 HRT1: Kore nani?
   HRT1: What’s this?
02 Sachiko: Ramen ga nagai. Ramen.
   Sachiko: Ramen is long. Ramen.
   HRT1: Long. Looong. Short, looong including the gesture would be good. And no short.
04 All: Long, no short.
05 HRT1: Hora yatte. Kousuruyo.
   HRT1: Try it. Like this.
06 Sachiko: Soup ga tsukawareteirukara soup.
   Sachiko: It uses soup, that’s why soup.
07 HRT1: Soup, it’s soup.
08 Sachiko: Sampun.
   Sachiko: Three minutes.
09 HRT1: Sampun wa chotto jikan chigau yo. 12ji yattara 12ji, ah, kore mitetara motto futoku shinaito. Motto futoku shinaito.
   HRT1: This does not right for three minutes. 12 o’clock is 12 o’clock, ah, if you look at this, you need to make it thicker. Make it thicker.
10 HRT1: Three minutes.
11 All: Three
12 HRT1: Minutes
13 All: Limits
14 HRT1: Limits chau, minutes.
   HRT1: Not limits, minutes.
15 All: Minutes
16 HRT1: Three minutes
17 All: Three minutes
18 HRT1: Unn. Honde?

² In all the excerpts shown in the following sections, the original utterances were translated into English if necessary.
Prior to this conversation, the students had already finished preparing their hand-drawn visual illustrations and were trying to muster up all the necessary language expressions they would use for the presentation, and the HRT1 happened to be circulating around them and initiated the conversation. The answer to the quiz question that the students were thinking of is instant noodle or ramen. The conversation was directed by the students, who inquired about the quiz hints in English (line 02, 06, 08, and 19) and HRT1 responded by adding gesture and stressing on the vowel (line 03), changing illustration (line 09), and repeating (line 16). An error was made by the students in line 13, which is normal as HRT1 was not expecting perfection on their first attempt. The use of ‘let’s’ in line 22, demonstrated that the teacher was offering further help in a polite way, as HRT1 was not quite confident in line 20. As a result, the ‘us’ usage enabled the teacher and the students to share the learning experience and they mutually engaged toward the goal of the task on an equal plane level, as in intersubjectivity principle (see footnote 1), where participation is non-threatening and communication is non-forced (principle of flow). Although the teacher still controls the conversation, it is quite different from the interaction typically observed in a traditional language lesson (e.g. IRE, where students usually do not take the initiative). The interactions between the teacher and the students might seem fairly simple, but the dynamic lies within the strategy that the teacher used while providing the translation.
Instead of simply giving the students the answer and having them memorize it for the presentation, she added gesture, stressed the vowel and provided the antonym. This sort of strategy used is referred to as multimodal support through visual, gestural and actional cues (Gibbons, 2004). The video data revealed that the students were able to demonstrate their quiz hints independently and also included the gestural component to further elaborate the meaning for the audiences.

The ALT also contributed to the adoption of different scaffolding strategies. The following is an excerpt which also demonstrated how the teacher used a different approach to scaffold the students. The conversation took place between an ALT and another group of students, who were discussing the hints for the answer “an anteater”.

**Excerpt 2: ALT Scaffolding**

01 All: Ari no kyouteki.
   *All: Formidable enemy of ants.*
   *ALT: For that. Lower your voices. That means it likes ants. So, how do you say it? Use it. It likes, mean like something. It likes...ants. ‘Ari’ is ant. Ants in English.*
03 Mayumi: It like...]
04 ALT: ]It likes
05 Mayumi: It like...eh?
06 ALT: It? (trying to initiate sentence co-construction)
07 Mayumi: It
08 ALT: It? (trying to withdraw responses from the students)
09 Kenji: It?
10 ALT: Sou sou. It...
   *ALT: Yes, yes. It...*
11 Mayumi: It likes
12 Kenji: Like?
In the conversation above, the students asked the ALT how to phrase a hint, "It (=An anteater) is a formidable enemy of ants" (line 01). The ALT recast the students' choice of words (line 02) into a different expression "It likes ants" because it was seemingly more suitable and appropriate at their level of their proficiency. We assume that ALT's reinterpretation of the original phrase was posed because students' production needed to meet the goal of the task. The recasting the ALT used was one of the scaffolding strategies (Mercer, 2000), in which the teacher not only would help the students prepare the quiz, but also control the language which would be comprehensible for the students who actually answer it in the later stage of the task. In line 03-16, the students were trying to note down the English sounds using Japanese characters (katakana). For the students to retain the target expressions better, they prefer to note it down and memorize it for the later stages. Some language teachers and experts might argue against the idea of letting students note down words phonetically using their native language, but there is no better tool at their current stage of development\(^3\). If the ALT were to force the students to write the sentence down using alphabets, it

\(^3\) By using Japanese kataana as phonetic symbols, it serves the purpose of mediating the students to achieve their goals. Further discussion on mediation of artifacts can be found in section 4.3.
probably would jeopardize the naturalness, bring the conversation to a halt, and result in failure to scaffold. Toward the end of this excerpt, line 19, the ALT also used ‘let’s’ to show that the learning experience was being shared (Sharpe, 2001).

The same group of students in excerpt 2 continued their journey with the scaffolding provided by the ALT, and the phenomenon of negotiation also took place. “A computer” was the answer of their quiz and the students did not have as much trouble on recalling this vocabulary as the hints to it.

**Excerpt 3: ALT Scaffolding**

01 Kenji: Denki wo kuu.  
*Kenji: Eats power.*

02 ALT: Doushiyou. Kanarazu ‘Kuu’ iitainn dane.  
*ALT: What shall we do with this one? You want to say ‘eat’.*

03 Mayumi, Kenji: Taberu.  
*Mayumi, Kenji: To eat*

04 ALT: Jya, sakki to onaji.  
*ALT: Ok, same as the previous one.*

05 Yoichi: [cutting in the conversation] ‘Thunder’…

06 Mayumi: It...

07 ALT: It...

08 Mayumi: It... It...

09 ALT: It eats

10 Yoichi: ‘It thunder’

11 Mayumi: ‘It, it’s…’

12 ALT: Eats. Taberu toki wa eats. ‘It eats…”

13 Yoichi: Thunder, thunder, ah, chigauwa, ‘bolt’.  
*Yoichi: Thunder, thunder, ah, no wait, bolt.*

*ALT: Power. ‘Denki’ is power.*

15 Yoichi: ‘Power, power’.
In Excerpt 3, similar to Excerpt 2, the students initiated the conversation by inquiring about a phrase (line 01) and the ALT reconfirmed the students’ choice of word (line 02). The word “eat” in “It (=a computer) eats power”, although not entirely incorrect, is unconventional when it comes to energy consumption; the verb “use” might be a better choice of word. While the ALT showed hesitation in line 02, he was seemingly evaluating the usage frequency of the word ‘use’ and the familiarity of the word ‘eat’ and in order to avoid interruption of the conversation’s flow, he decided to let the students use the verb ‘eat’. The students insisted on their word of choice and reiterated the verb form of the word once again (line 03). The ALT then tried to have them recall the verb and the sentence (line 04) by reminding them of the same sentence structure that they co-constructed in the earlier “anteater” quiz (See Excerpt 2). He was explicitly linking discourses to students’ prior knowledge, which is another strategy that provides scaffolding (Wells, 1999). Mayumi tried (line 06) and struggled (line 08, 11) to come up with the correct response, and the ALT had to take over (line 09, 12). While Mayumi was busy trying to come up with the proper verb for the sentence, Yoichi also tried to participate in this joint construction of the sentence by providing the object “thunder” (line 06, 10). Yoichi repeatedly negotiated with the ALT and tried to gain approval or acceptance of his word choices (line 13), although he failed. The ALT had to introduce the term “power” (line 14) and Yoichi gladly accepted and repeated it (line 15). All the members were focused and engaged mutually on the same quiz hint and overcame challenges with assistance. The students also explored possibilities, such as in the case of Yoichi, where failure in negotiation was accepted. There was no sign of forced communication, and an anxiety-free atmosphere was established. This also enabled the students work collaboratively on the quiz hints.
4.2 Collective Scaffolding

Scaffolding took place as a result of the dialogic interactions that occurred not only between the teacher and the students, but also among the students within the same group. This form of peer scaffolding is what Donato (1994) referred to as collective scaffolding. Besides lexical learning, which is mostly scaffolded by the teachers, the students also developed logical thinking while interacting among each other. When the dialogic interactions among the students were further analyzed, focusing on equality and mutuality, more details were revealed. Equality refers to equal contributions or distribution of turns, plus equal degree of control over the direction of the task (van Lier, 1996), whereas the level of engagement with each other’s contribution, such as reciprocal feedback and sharing of ideas, refers to mutuality (Damon & Phelps, 1989). Within the task design of our study, the older students, 6th graders, took the role of group leaders and guided the group into task completion. Since the common goal among the students was to create and present the quizzes, everyone pooled all available resources and engaged on each other under the leadership of the six graders.

Excerpt 4: Collective Scaffolding

01 Tadashi: Tabemono de, gohan, mazu gohan, gohan ga atte, tamago.
   Tadashi: Food, rice. Rice, you have rice first and then egg.
02 Tetsuya: Ah, wakatta. Omuraisu ya.
   Tetsuya: Ah, I know, it’s an omelet.
03 Tadashi: Chigau.
   Tadashi: That’s incorrect.
04 Tadashi: Oyakode tabetara oishii.
   Tadashi: It’s delicious when eaten together by a parent and a child.
05 Ren: Oyakodon.
   Ren: Japanese rice bowl with chicken and egg.
06 Tetsuya: Ahh ii.
Testuya: Ahh, that's good.

07 Shinji: Wakaruna.
    Shinji: That's understandable.

08 Tadashi: De
    Tadashi: And

09 Tetsuya: Kiiroi
    Tetsuya: Yellow

10 Tadashi: Ahh, demo sore igaini iiyann.
    Tadashi: Ahh, that's also a good idea.

    Tadashi: We shouldn't put "parent and child", change it to family. It's also not a good idea to put rice in there. "White". Put "white" in there. "White".

12 Ren: Zembu iro de.
    Ren: Change everything to color.

13 Tadashi: "Gohan" yattara wakaru.
    Tadashi: It's understandable if we put down "Rice"


15 Seiji: Tsubu!? Tsubuwa naa.
    Seiji: Grain? Grain isn't...

16 Tetsuya: Nikuga haitteiru.
    Tetsuya: There are also meats in it.

17 Ren: Igai ni wakarahenn kara iinn yanai.
    Ren: No one will get it, it should be fine.
    (......)

18 Tadashi: "tsubu" "tsubu"
    Tadashi: "grain" "grain"

19 Shinji: "tsubu" wa akannte.
    Shinji: "Grain" is unacceptable.

In Excerpt 4, Tadashi, 6th grader, was listing the hint items, food, eggs, and rice (line 01). Tetsuya, hearing these, gave the answer omuraisu, or an omelet with a filling of fried rice, which is children's typical favorite food. Tadashi added a different hint, *It's delicious when eaten together by a parent and a child.* (line 04). The answer of the quiz, "oyakodon", literally means a parent and a child rice bowl, because this Japanese
rice bowl dish contains chicken and eggs. Then they began to consider the colors which were associated with the food, white for rice and yellow for the egg. However, Tadashi reconsidered the parent and child hint and suggested that it (oyako) might make the quiz too easy. After this the students negotiated with each other and narrowed down the hint items. In line 17, Ren commented that their quiz would be good because it is not too easy for everyone.

According to the HRTs, this was not the first time that the students from different grades encountered each other and thus members within the groups were familiar with each other. Their previous learning experiences shaped the contextual support for scaffolding (van Lier, 2004) and allowed the group members to openly discuss their ideas without holding back. Two strategies of scaffolding are worth mentioning. First, the group leader defined a particular theme, line 01 and 04, and elicits responses that draw other members along a particular line of reasoning (Sharpe, 2001). Second, similar to teacher-students scaffolding, repetition of responses, line 15 and 19, acted as a cohesive device and allowed members to carry ideas along and develop them together (Mercer, 2000).

The analysis above has demonstrated collective scaffolding, but there is more to it. By looking into the level of equality and mutuality of the dialogic interactions that took place among all four members, collaboration can also be seen. Although the 6th grader was assigned as the leader of the group, there is no obvious single individual who was in control of the task. A high level of equality can be observed since all four members contributed and took direction of task towards each other. A high level mutuality is also demonstrated by rich reciprocal feedback, such as in line 06, 07, 10, 15, 17, and 19, and sharing of ideas, such as in line 09, 11, 12, 14 and 16. With the pattern of moderate to high level of equality and moderate to high level of mutuality, Stroch (2002) labeled
this type of dialogic interaction \textit{collaborative}\textsuperscript{4}. Under the \textit{collaborative} pattern, negotiations take place, alternative views are offered and discussed, and resolutions that seem acceptable to all participants are reached. Since this group, after discussion, settled on "white rice, egg, and family" as their hints for the "oyakodon" quiz item, their dialogic interactions can also be labeled \textit{collaborative} as well.

Collaboration takes place when students work together to achieve a goal or when two or more people work together to realize shared goals. Moreover, the goal does not necessarily have to be something that is explicitly mentioned in the lesson. In our case, we discovered that the students conjointly had recalled a lexical phrase not only within their own group but also across into other groups. 'Recall' not only refers to the act of recollecting past information but also mediates current performance and supports task completion. The mediated and scaffolded recall then in turn makes use of the recalled item to scaffold further problem solving.

\textbf{Excerpt 5: Collective mediated scaffolding}

01 Tetsuya: Morau toki, nannte iunn dakke.  
\textit{Tetsuya: What do you say when you receiving something?}
02 Shinji: "Please"
03 Tetsuya: "Please" jyanai, mise de kau toki.  
\textit{Tetsuya: Not "please", when you shop at a store.}
\textit{Shinji: What? Shop? Um "What's this?" I forgot.}
05 Tetsuya: Sennsei, sennsei, sennsei (going to HRT3 and asking him) Mise

\textsuperscript{4} According to Storch, when an interaction is analyzed by its equality and mutuality, it will be categorized into one of these four patterns: \textit{collaborative}, \textit{dominant/dominant}, \textit{dominant/passive}, and \textit{expert/novice}.
de nannka morau toki, kau toki aruyann. ‘Kudasai’ tte namnte iunn yattakke. ‘Kudasai’

_Tetsuya: Teacher, teacher, teacher. (going to HRT3 and asking him) At the shop, when you receive, buy something. How do you say ‘kudasai’? ‘Kudasai’_

(Tetsuya went to a different group and asked another student)

06 Koichi: Here you are.
07 Tetsuya: Sore ha watasu toki ya. Morau toki. ‘Kudasai’ tteiutoki. ‘Kudasai’

_Tetsuya: That’s when you give out. When you receive. When you say ‘kudasai’. ‘Kudasai’._

08 Ren: Please
09 Tetsuya: “Please” jyanai. Ato ikho attayann.

_Tetsuya: Not “please”. There is another one._

10 Koichi: “Do you have…”
11 Tetsuya: “Green cap, green cap, do you have a green cap?” (chanting)

The conversation in Excerpt 7 took place in the beginning of the third lesson, right after getting into groups, where students were still in the planning stage. As the students were still discussing on what to include in their quizzes, Tetsuya tried to recall a phrase that they learned during the previous lessons, which is an expression used in transactions involving items in the shopping situation (line 01). The response provided by Shinji was not what Tetsuya was looking for and Tetsuya explained further by referring to the previous learning experience, the shopping activity (line 03). Shinji tried to recall the phrase again but was not able to draw an answer and gave up (line 04). As HRT3 walked into the classroom, Tetsuya pursued his question further but didn’t receive an answer (line 05). It is unclear why HRT3 didn’t respond to Tetsuya. Koichi, a student from another group, offered a phrase “Here you are” but Tetsuya noticed the same contextual information but from a reversal standpoint, thus reiterated his stance (line 06-07). Ren, who joined them in the middle of the conversation, tried to provide a similar lexical item “Please” that Shinji provided earlier (line 09). Koichi offered
another phrase "Do you have...?", which was exactly what Tetsuya was seeking for. This made Tetsuya happy and then he started chanting the phrase 'do you have', which the students learned from a previous lesson. Here, chanting demonstrated its potential as a form of meditational tool for learning and also scaffolded production. When Tetsuya failed to obtain the lexical item, he immediately referred to a particular scene of the previous learning situation, assuming that the others would retain the lexical knowledge. This excerpt demonstrated the phrases and expressions were situated in their experience of the activity and they jointly recalled them by interacting with each other and referring to a particular situation of the activity. By experiencing these social interactions, the students might be able to internalize the expressions and their appropriate use in the actual situations. However, there are two more things needed to be noted; the spontaneous nature of this conversation and the digression from the task. Although digression from the task is not desirable, the significance of using situated experiences as a mediational tool is crucial and should also be encouraged at their current stage of development.

4.3 Mediation by Artifacts

Scaffolding by the teachers alone does not necessarily provide enough social contexts for the students to develop; with teacher's careful design, rather than planning\(^5\), of the activities, additional external resources, physical or non-physical, the context could be even richer. Within our TBLT unit, the students are motivated due to the

\(^5\) Design involves features design and the relationship of theory of learning and theory of language procedure, curriculum, contents, and activities. Plan refers to what was intended to do in a given lesson, like in a lesson plan. (Richards & Rodgers, 1982)
nature of goal-driven activity and to achieve that, they are encouraged to use any form
of tools. For Vygotsky, association with the use of psychological tools or signs is a
hallmark of human consciousness, which can also be interpreted that we contact with
the social and physical world through mediation (Wertsch, 2007). The source of
mediation can be either a material tool (elaborated further below); a system of symbols
(e.g. Japanese katakana, see footnote 3), or the behavior of another human being in
social interactions (e.g. classroom interactions in this study). These tools can be
appropriated ‘by acting upon with them … in the course of actively reconstructing their
meaning and function’ and it is possible ‘only through interaction with other people
who already have the knowledge of a given cultural tool’ (Stetsenko and Arievitch 2002,
p.87). An example of mediation using a cultural artifact, picture dictionary, is illustrated
in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 6: Mediation via a picture dictionary

01 Riku: Etto...youchienjitte, eigo de nannte iunn desuka?
   *Riku: mmm...how do you say 'youchienji' in English?*
02 HRT2: Youchien no kodomo.
   *HRT2: Children in the kindergarten.*
03 ALT: [slowly] Kindergarten student
04 Riku: Eh? Eh?
   *Riku: What? What?*
   (HRT2 pointing to the picture of kindergarten in the picture dictionary
   which Riku looked up earlier)
05 HRT2: Hoo. Koreyane. [showing the page to ALT2]
   *HRT2: Oh. This one?*
06 ALT: Sou sou sou. Kore kindergarten
   *ALT: Yes yes yes. That's kindergarten.*
07 Hiroko: Kindergarten
08 ALT: Kindergarten ne. De student.
   *ALT: Kindergarten and then student*
The students in the group had already decided on the quiz answer, which was 'Crayon Shin-chan', a popular Japanese cartoon character. One of the hint illustrations that the students were looking for was “kindergarten student” because the cartoon character was a kindergarten student. Seiji was flipping the pages of the picture dictionary, searching for an illustration reference to the expression. The students were only able to find “kindergarten” in the picture dictionary but not able to pronounce the word. Riku initiated the question to ALT, asking for the pronunciation (line 01) and this was further helped by HRT2 (line 02), who broke the word “yochienji” into two
Japanese lexical items ("yochien no kodomo") to make the word easier for ALT to understand. HRT2, Riku and ALT were paying their attention to the picture of the dictionary (line 05-06). The students continued their search for the appropriate picture to illustrate the hint from the vocabulary words received earlier and the ALT further explained the meaning of "student" (line 10). Riku, trying to check the spelling of "student" using the word index in the picture dictionary, asked ALT for the initial letter of the word (line 13). Since Riku went back and forth with the ALT (line 14-21), we can safely assume that he had already internalized the knowledge of the alphabets, particularly its order, without which he would not be able to search the word. In the end, Riku and ALT found the word and the page number of the illustration in the picture dictionary and ALT was pleased (line 22). Excerpt 6 shows that, resources such as a picture dictionary allowed the student to act upon but this was only possible when appropriate assistance by the teacher was provided since his knowledge of alphabets and spelling necessary for searching the words in the dictionary were very limited at this developmental stage. In other words, the dictionary became functional because the linguistic knowledge the student had interacted with teacher’s guidance which was attuned to the student’s linguistic ability.

The picture dictionary, when combined with teacher’s appropriate guidance, appears to have further promoted student’s vocabulary retention. The conversation in Excerpt 7 below took place on the following lesson of excerpt 6, where the students were in their final preparatory stage for report.

**Excerpt 7: Medication outcome**

01 Hiroko: Nanteiu?
When Hiroko asked Seiji to translate those lexical items into English, Seiji tried to give her English words but stopped right after 'kindergarten', when Riku jumped in and continued the words and even volunteered to present that particular hint. Referring back to Excerpt 6, Riku was the one who questioned the lexical item and researched through a picture dictionary with the ALT. Although Seiji was alongside Riku at time of looking up the lexical item, he was not yet able to say the words, and Riku completed the word that Seiji tried to say. We can only hope that with Riku's prior knowledge of the alphabets with the teacher's guidance, he was ready to embrace the picture dictionary mediation and go beyond letters into the vocabulary (i.e. 'student'). In the case of Seiji, this sort of mediation was seemingly incompatible to his current level of development. It can only be assumed that this is an instance of the ZPD changing through activity over time, although both students were using the same tool, the picture dictionary, and as results, the assistance once offered by the ALT had been internalized by Riku, thus allowing him to provide a further guidance to other group members. Alternatively, the action of flipping through the picture dictionary physically with the guidance provided by the ALT in excerpt 4 might have scaffolded Riku better than Seiji thus helped Riku memorize the lexical item better than Seiji.

Mediation bridged the gap between student-teacher or peer interaction by
providing a common reference point between participants and facilitating the communication process. By bringing the artifact into the context, the picture dictionary became the center of attention of all engaging participants. The students were encouraged to explore under the supportive guidance from the teacher and access to means and goals was promoted even further. *Mediation by the artifacts* initially requires attuned scaffolding by the teacher and eventually shifts the control to the students and builds on their independent learning.
Chapter 5 Discussion and Implication for the Japanese Primary EFL Context

Upon analyzing TBLT from a SCT perspective, this study suggests three distinctive features that led towards learning. Among all these features, dialogic interaction is the common denominator. Whether it is the language or the logical thinking that is scaffolded during the task, students have to engage in some form of dialogic interactions with the teachers or among themselves. The mediational artifact that served between the teacher and the students further promoted their dialogic interactions. Needless to say, in the collective scaffolding, the common contextual referential point is the dynamic driving force of dialogic interactions among students in groups. According to sociocultural theory, joint activities (or tasks) allow learners to co-construct knowledge collaboratively, which brings about learners’ cognitive processes in L2 learning (Lantolf, 1996). Vygotsky believed that dialogic interaction initiates language learning first on the inter-psychological plane and then move into individual’s mental plane (intra-psychological plane). Learners first participate in social activities, main sources of mental/cognitive activities, and engage their cognitive process via interacting with other people. In SCT, it is claimed that cognitive development and language development occur on the inter-psychological plane while these processes take place. Assuming what emerges in the social plane will eventually represented internally, language development would also eventually be represented intra-psychologically. Simply put, learners internalize language via dialogic interactions with others, and TBLT provided a portal entry for it to take place. TBLT led to the transformation of classroom talk from traditional patterns of talk to dialogic support from teachers and students for language production and learning. Key evidences of learning were observed during the language focus, where majority of students, if not all,
were able to recall the three hints in English by presenting just the answer cards. Since not all learning leads to development, a longitudinal study would be required to collect further evidences.

The teachers in the present study provided the students with a clear goal and objective in the context of a Japanese primary school classroom. As the result of this goal-driven task, the students interacted with the teacher and with each other in order to complete the task. Here is the important point that we discussed. The task creates conditions for scaffolded talk by the teacher to students and students to each other. Scaffolding cannot occur in the absence of problem-solving and meaningful tasks. If we want scaffolding to occur, we must re-contextualize classroom activities. Before creating such a classroom environment, however, language teachers need to reconceptualize the notion of scaffolding they embrace. As discussed earlier, scaffolding is not just any assistance or help from the teachers. It is conceptual and at the same time practical in its nature. This type of reorientation enables teachers to interact with students in different ways and thus transforms a teacher-centered into a learner-centered classroom. The social contexts in the classroom are also enriched further due to this goal-driven task and allow learning to take place further via mediation. Moreover, the students receive plenty of chances to work and build on their social relationship within the designated group or among groups through collaboration. In our study, it was clearly demonstrated that language learning takes place better via TBLT, resulting in dynamic interactions.

Having discussed how TBLT can benefit early language teaching in the Japanese primary EFL classroom, we now point out some remaining issues. As the aim of the new Course of Study for Foreign Language Activity focuses on the development of the foundation of communication abilities, TBLT could be a potential candidate for
alternative approach to FLA. Under the current EFL structure in the Japanese primary schools, however, implementing TBLT might be a bit challenging, although not entirely impossible. The fact that majorities of the HRTs are undertrained\(^6\) and most of them lack self confidence about their language abilities is the first hurdle to be cleared, although we did not have too much trouble with this issue. Even though both HRTs did not receive any additional training prior to this study, compared to their own lessons, they seemed to be interacting more with the students. According to the post-unit interview, both HRTs felt that the overall lesson objectives had been reached. The students also took learning more independently, and they would not hesitate to use this form of teaching in the future. Secondly, because of the prevalent adoption of *Eigo Note*, lesson procedures contained the teacher's manuals are shared and even begin to be standardized among the schools. HRTs, who want to employ TBLT approaches, thus are required to prepare additional materials beyond the textbooks and make a continual commitment. The context of *Eigo Note* and the curriculum can be improved by the inclusion of tasks that naturally support dialogic interaction and responsive scaffolded assistance. In other words, including interesting collaborative tasks not only increases student engagement with learning but creates conditions for this learning to take place. Finally, the implementation will take more than just one HRT to initiate, a conjoint or team effort would make a difference. Further investigation of these obstacles might shed more light on TBLT in Japanese primary EFL context.

\(^6\) In our study, both ALTs had teaching experience at the elementary schools, but generally, ALTs who are allocated in schools through Japan Exchange Teaching Program are not required to obtain certificates for EFL or ESL teachers. Thus, language teacher training is also needed for those ALTs.
We would like to conclude that, providing meaningful and interesting age-appropriate tasks in the context of *Eigo Note* improves the curriculum, creates conditions for scaffolding to emerge naturally, and transform the nature of dialog in FLA classes. This transformation of discourse is essential and necessary to language development, especially in the early stage of learning. Thus it can also be concluded that TBLT led to the transformation of classroom talk from traditional patterns of talk (e.g. IRE) to dialogic support from teachers and students for language production, learning, and potential development (though this require further investigation).
References


van Lier, L. (2001) Constraints and resources in classroom talk: Issues of equality and


