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

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. TBLT curriculum design 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 on each other 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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