

# Project-based Language Teaching and Learning: An Alternative to Skill-based Instruction?: A Neo-social Interactionist Perspective

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**Abstract:** This article offers a brief introduction to a version of project-based language instruction (PBLI) while reviewing its theoretical rationale with particular focus on differences between PBLI and two popular forms of language instruction: task-based language instruction (TBLI) and content-based instruction (CBI), which are often jointly used under a skill-based (SB) syllabus in today's EFL classrooms in Japanese higher education. The article first reviews the tenets of these instructional approaches, then in light of *neo social-interactionist* views of language learning, it attempts to problematize the cognition central views in SLA as frequently adopted in designing commercial textbooks, and finally discusses the potential benefits of PBLI with an example of PBLI-based activity from a university-level EFL classroom as a resource for EFL practitioners.

**Keywords:** *Language learning theory, SLA, Project-based language instruction.*

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## Introduction

Until recently, Japanese English language education predominantly focused on developing learners' linguistic knowledge through grammar-translation method. As the purpose of language education increasingly becomes *communicative* in nature, the landscape of English language teaching in Japan has radically changed from teaching of knowledge to that of performance or skills. Correspondingly, many Japanese universities today offer English language courses which aim to develop Japanese English learners' communicative language ability through teaching a number of distinctive language skills under the banner of what I refer to as *skill-based Instruction* (SBI). On both English language teaching and research, the notion of skill has made a significant impact reshaping the construct of language ability as a collective set of distinctive language skills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing and their associated sub-skills. As a pedagogical and theoretical rationale for developing language skills as the primary objective of language teaching, Skill-Acquisition Theory (SAT) in SLA (Dekeyser, 2007) can be considered most relevant.

SAT posits that all forms of learning begin with exposure to “environmental or cognitive event”, and with sufficient exposure and practice, acquired knowledge becomes operationalized and appropriate language behaviors become increasingly

routinized and automatic (Speelman, 2005, p.26). Thus, SAT essentially views language learning as a developmental process of obtaining rules (i.e. declarative knowledge) and of proceduralizing learned knowledge (i.e. procedural knowledge) (Vanpatten & Benati, 2010), which ultimately leads to skill acquisition. This cognition central view of language learning is highly compatible with the pedagogical rationales of arguably the two most popular forms of language instruction in current English language education in Japan: 1. Task-Based Language Instruction (TBLI), and 2. Content-Based Instruction (CBI). Although these two forms of language instruction have a number of advantages, there is a concern as to how they fare against the *social turn* in SLA theory (Block, 2003) and a number of alternative theories of L2 learning which actively embrace situated, social, and/or ecological views of language learning (Ortega, 2011). As such, this article first reviews the theoretical underpinnings of TBLI and CBI respectively and then moves to discuss their potential issues by reviewing an activity example of a commercial textbook. Finally, the article introduces Project-Based Language Instruction (PBLI) as a potential alternative teaching approach which subsumes the strengths of TBLI and of CBI while highlighting the compatibility of PBLI with the *neo social-interactionist* views of language learning.

## **Task-based Language Instruction**

TBLI is a general term used to refer to language instruction which involves tasks or activities of varying nature to facilitate language learning. Although there is no universal definition of task, Skehan (1998) proposed four basic criteria of language learning task. First, a language learning task needs to contain some form of communication problem to solve. Second, learning tasks need to be related to real-world activities. Third, instruction should focus on the completion of tasks, and finally assessment should be carried out based on the outcomes of the tasks but not the process. These task criteria above reflect the rationale of TBLI which emphasizes the importance of developing the language ability to perform a task without explicit instruction on target language structure (Rahimpour, 2008). Researchers argue that meaningful tasks can provide optimal conditions for the development of second language performance than the much despised yet popularly used language teaching approach—grammar translation—whose primary focus is on the development of linguistic knowledge (Long, 1985; Prabhu, 1987, Robinson, 2001). This focus of TBLI on language performance is also indicated by Nunan (2004) in which he defines language learning tasks as:

A piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning and in which *the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form* (p.4). (italics added)

As stated above, tasks provide a context for comprehension, manipulation, and production in the target language to convey meaning. Based on this rationale, TBLI typically contains three different types of task: 1. information-gap, 2. opinion-gap, and 3. reasoning-gap (see Prabhu, 1987). Each of the task types provides a situation where there is some problem to solve through communicative interaction. In actual practice, however, the nature of tasks designed may also deviate from this original conceptualization of task presented above. This is due to a variety of theories of learning and the role of communicative interaction proposed since the inception of TBLI (e.g., *psycholinguistic perspective*, Krashen, 1981, 1985, 1994; Long, 1983, *cognitive perspective*, Skehan & Foster, 2001; Ellis, 2005, and *sociocultural perspective*, Lantolf, 2001; Shehadeh, 2005; Swain, & Lapkin, 2001). At this juncture, it is important to note that language learning tasks may vary in their nature depending on the underlying rationales adopted to design learning tasks. Accordingly, the purpose of learning through tasks may also vary.

## **Content-Based Instruction**

CBI is another popular strand of language teaching approach. The theoretical assumption of CBI has much relevance to that of the Whole Language Approach (WLA). Similar to WLA, in CBI, language learning is viewed holistically in contrast to learning of discrete linguistic forms. This holistic view of language learning is intentionally coupled with explicit focus on content in which language is situated given the assumption that language and content are inseparable. Thus, in CBI, instructors actively use contents of often academic in nature to deliver instruction and learning tasks to develop students' both content knowledge and language proficiency (Brinton, Snow, Wesche, 1989; Wesche, 1993).

Based on the aforementioned pedagogical underpinnings, tasks in CBI attempt to link learning of subject matter and of language. Therefore, the design of tasks in CBI becomes highly and necessarily content-specific; language elements to be learned are specified by the nature of the content adopted. From SLA perspectives, CBI received support primarily from mainstream cognitive SLA. For instance, the notion of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982; 1985) is regarded as a key theoretical concept to explain the importance of content in language learning (Lyster, 1987; Met, 1991; Swain, 1985). Cummins' (1981) notion of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) necessitates the concurrent learning of academic content and academic language. Content also contextualizes the language in much more concrete form signaling departure from teaching abstract linguistic rules in traditional language instruction (Genesee, 1994). As for a more general theory of language learning, Curtain (1995) argued that natural language acquisition never happens without context and CBI can provide a context for meaningful communication with focus on both form and meaning. Thus, CBI is presumed to provide a language learning environment wherein appropriate language use and behavior are specified and learned through the adopted content domain.

## Issues in Skill Acquisition Theory Based Instruction: A Neo-Social Interactionist Perspective

Many commercial ELT textbooks available in the Japanese market often display clear connection to TBLI and CBI but with specific focus on language skill development. For example, a textbook—*World Link* (Morgan, & Douglas, 2016)—published by Cengage Learning is designed to develop language knowledge—vocabulary and grammar, and language skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Each unit is organized around a topic in which a variety of topic-related language learning tasks are provided. In addition, the design of the textbook clearly communicates its intended goal of learning as developing language skills as underscored in SAT. The design of the aforementioned textbook and its intended goal of learning are certainly not unique to this particular textbook. In fact, as I reviewed a number of commercial textbooks recently published by well-reputed publishers including, Cambridge English, Oxford University Press, Longman, and Macmillan Language House, I found all of the textbooks share the common characteristics in terms of their task designs—content-based tasks or activities with the explicit aim to develop language knowledge and skills. These skill-based (SB) textbooks thus uniformly present a trace of distinctively cognitive views of language learning—SAT.

A number of potential issues in SB commercial textbooks can be identified in light of what I refer to as *neo-social interactionist* views of language learning in SLA in contrast to traditional social interactionist theories of learning within cognitive SLA (see Atkinson, 2011, for a review of alternative approaches in SLA). As a basic tenet, neo-social interactionists in SLA view language learning is inextricably linked to social context of learning, and the specific nature of context shapes the trajectory of learning (Larsen-Freeman, 2011). This view can also be extended to the nature of tasks or activities provided in the language classroom. Although mainstream SLA researchers acknowledge the significance of social settings in language learning, they tend to treat the mind exclusively as the central locus of language development. Davis (1995), for instance, stated, “Theorists and researchers tend to view SLA as a mental process, that is, to believe that language acquisition resides mostly, if not solely, in the mind (pp.427–428). Thus, any form of outside influence including language instruction is conceptualized as *input*, which presupposes the duality of the mind and environment as exemplified in “computational metaphor of acquisition” (Ellis, 1997, p.87). In this paradigm, language learning tasks are mere a vehicle of knowledge and means of exercising or reinforcing the relevant knowledge which leads to the acquisition of language skills. Thus, social aspects of language learning tasks including the potential impact of the assumed goals and surrounding context of the tasks are pushed to the margin if not entirely disregarded.

Against this backdrop, I argue that the resultant designs of tasks provided in SB textbooks, which embraces either implicitly or explicitly the cognition central view of language learning (i.e., SAT), are their insufficient authenticity—asocial and potentially irrelevant to the needs of students. A common pattern of tasks which can be observed

in SB textbooks is that each task almost always aims to develop a discrete language skill in a highly artificial manner, whether it is for listening, reading, writing, or speaking. To demonstrate an aspect of insufficient authenticity, consider Figure 1, an example of speaking activity from *World Link* (Morgan, & Douglas, 2016, p.21):

**Figure 1**

*Skill-Based Textbook Speaking Activity Example*

**B** Practice the conversation with a partner.

**SPEAKING STRATEGY**

**C** Study the Useful Expressions. Then complete the dialogs below with a partner. Sometimes more than one answer is possible.

- A: \_\_\_\_\_ stop at that cafe for coffee.  
B: Good \_\_\_\_\_!
- A: What time do you want to meet in the morning?  
B: \_\_\_\_\_ meet at 7:00?  
A: That's a little early. \_\_\_\_\_ meeting at 8:00 instead?  
B: That's \_\_\_\_\_ with me. See you then.
- A: What do you want to do today?  
B: \_\_\_\_\_ going to the beach?  
A: I don't \_\_\_\_\_ to. \_\_\_\_\_ see a movie instead.  
B: OK, \_\_\_\_\_ good.

**D** Get into a group of three and do the following:

- On your own: think of two good restaurants.
- Suggest one of the restaurants to your partners. They can accept or refuse. If a person refuses, he or she should say why and suggest another restaurant.
- Change roles and repeat steps 1 and 2 until each student makes a suggestion.

**Useful Expressions**

Making suggestions			Responding to suggestions
<b>Statements</b>			Good / Great idea!
Let's _____	have _____	Thai food for dinner.	(That) sounds good (to me). (That's) fine with me.
<b>Questions</b>			I don't really want to. I don't really feel like it.
Why don't we _____	have _____	Thai food for dinner?	
How about _____	having _____		
<b>Speaking tip</b>			
When rejecting a suggestion, it's common to give an explanation: <i>I don't really feel like it. I'm too tired.</i>			

Why don't we go to Parr's Steakhouse for lunch?

That's a great idea!

I don't really feel like steak. How about having Indian food instead?

LESSON A • Foods we like 21

As shown in Figure 1, the speaking activity under “Speaking Strategy,” first begins with learning specific language expressions through a traditional information gap activity. Then it moves on to a more communicative task in which students are expected to put the learned expressions into practice. This transition of the activity mirrors the theory of SAT—the focus of the activity is to develop declarative and procedural knowledge to improve speaking skills which are assumed to transfer to and to be usable in an assumed real social setting. In terms of the authenticity of the activity, it can be reasonably assumed that the language expressions covered in this particular activity reflect “real-world language use” (Willis, & Willis, 2007, p. 136)—an important condition to ensure a language learning task is authentic for effective language acquisition (Ellis, 2003). However, the notion of authenticity is not only about the use of authentic materials or in this case, authentic expressions. Guariento and Morley (2001) provide a much more robust and comprehensive view on the notion of authenticity by defining it through *genuine purpose, real world targets, classroom interaction, and engagement*. Through this lens, the activity example above clearly falls short on the genuine purpose condition—the purpose of the task approximates the purpose of language use in real life. This is because the sole purpose of language learning tasks provided under SBI is the development of language skills. Therefore, the artificiality of tasks is almost always present in SB textbooks.

By contrast, in real life communicative situations, the purpose of using language is to satisfy one's communicative needs. We do not engage in a social interaction to learn how to make suggestions in English or to improve English language skills. We do, however, engage in a social interaction to negotiate and/or exchange with interlocutors by using a variety of communicative expressions (e.g., suggestions), and such process of social interaction almost never completes by only making suggestions. In other words, goals of communicating through language are fundamentally social in nature wherein participants of a social setting with possibly conflicting communicative needs and goals actively seek to *adapt* to the social setting by using language as a tool. Here, I highlight one particular notion—adaptation, which is an important concept in neo-social interactionist views of language learning, most particularly in sociocognitive theory of language learning.

In sociocognitive approach, learning is a process and outcome of one's attempt to adapt to his/her environment, as Atkinson (2011) states:

A key sociocognitive claims is that we learn as we live—that learning and being are integrated processes. As we continuously adapt to our environments, something of that adaptation is retained—that is, we learn by experience (p.149).

Atkinson (2011) further provides five implications of the basic sociocognitive claim for learning. Of which, two of them are most relevant to the current discussion: 1. “learning becomes dynamic adaptive to—or alignment with—the environment”, and 2. “we learn *through* environmental action” (p.149). Based on these implications, language learning then can be seen as the process of achieving a means by which participants of a social setting actively attempt to adapt to the environment in response to often-emergent and situation-specific needs to achieve their communicative goals.

Another key concept which merits a brief discussion here is the *emergence* of communicative needs. If the environment or the context of a social setting is an antecedent to the emergence of one's communicative needs, then the nature of language learning tasks almost certainly shape at least in part what kinds of communicative needs would emerge on the part of students. In SB textbooks, at the cost of casting away an aspect of authenticity, tasks are often designed to control the nature of learning context to the extent that students are forced to use specific expressions to satisfy the artificially created communicative needs as in the activity example in Figure 1. In light of the sociocognitive theory of learning, however, language is defined as “a tool for social action: selling fish, arguing, sharing stories, calming children (Atkinson, 2011, p.146). In this regard, communicative needs naturally emerge in the process of carrying out a social action. One major issue to be highlighted thus is that activities in SB textbooks by nature do not seem to promote language use in close alignment with real-life social actions. The centrality of the issue then here is whether or not a degree of artificiality in language learning tasks as in Figure 1 is problematic in improving/developing students' language skills. According to Lave (1996) and Lave and Wenger (1991), learning in school itself entails particular social actions. Thus, learning skills or tools through artificial learning tasks is an accepted and often uncontested means of *community of*

*practice* within the system of schooling. However, they further argue that skills learned in school are not often readily transferrable to real-world situations, and hence their pedagogical value exists almost exclusively within the system of schooling but not *out there*. If this is truly the case, then the kind of artificiality of language learning tasks presented earlier leads to a question as to whether or not such tasks can effectively prepare students for using English in real-life situations.

Although there is a limitation to the degree of authenticity that teachers can ensure in designing language learning tasks, and even some level of artificiality in tasks is necessary given a number of practical constraints present in the instructional context (e.g., student proficiency, course objectives, and availability of resources) (Ellis, 2009; Butler, 2011). Richards (2006), for example, argues that ensuring 100% authenticity in language teaching, if that is even remotely possible, is not “necessary” or “realistic, calling it “the myth of authenticity” (p.16). While I fully concur with this position, I argue that an attempt should be made to increase the level of authenticity of language learning tasks, most particularly in terms of *genuine purpose*. On the basis of sociocognitive theory of learning presented above, I propose in the following section somewhat radical reconceptualization of designing and delivering language learning tasks to remedy at least partially the kind of artificiality present in SBI and its associated tasks.

## **Project-Based Language Instruction**

An important theoretical foundation of PBLI is constructivist theory of learning, which posits that knowledge is constructed socio-historically through interactions with the environment wherein students have to engage in social actions—activities which actively promote use of both language and physical tools to achieve a genuine real-life social goal (Perkins, 1991; Piaget, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978). As can be seen, this theoretical view is highly compatible with neo social-interactionist theory of language learning since constructivist theory of learning places an emphasis on engagement in social actions.

There are a number of benefits in PBIL reported in the literature, some of the notable strengths of PBIL in relation to the earlier discussion are:

1. it can help students to transfer skills/knowledge learned through a project to similar real world contexts (Sidman-Taveau, & Milner-Bolotin, 2001).
2. it can cater to a variety of students’ learning needs (Lawrence, 1997).
3. it can help students to learn and exercise a number of social skills: to plan, organize, negotiate, make consensus, research and present information (Stein, 1995).
4. it can genuinely motivate students to learn language and promote language acquisition (Ellis, 1994).

Before discussing the principles of designing projects in PBIL, the following presents an

example of PBIL—a project that I developed and implemented to teach low-intermediate English proficiency level of Japanese university students who majored in Business Administration.

## The Dream Product Project

This project entitled as the “Dream Product Project” (see Appendix) was implemented in a freshman year integrative English class for Business Administration majors at a Japanese private university. The purpose of the project was to develop an imaginary commercial product and present it in class. The project followed four major stages: 1. Product Planning, 2. Product Designing, 3. Product Development Meeting, and 4. Product Presentation as shown in Table 1 below:

**Table 1**  
*Project Overview*

<b>Project Stage</b>	<b>Major Task</b>	<b>Instructional Focus</b>
	group discussion	negotiating, proposing, reasoning, explaining
Product Planning	reflection paper writing	
	product invention, defining the product, reviewing real product specifications,	reading and writing product descriptions
Product Designing	creativity, reasoning, describing, writing product descriptions	
Product Development Meeting	group discussion	sharing, negotiating, problem-solving group-decision making
Product Presentation	group presentation	describing, justifying, persuading,
	post-presentation discussion	problem-solving, evaluating

During the course of the project, students were required to work collaboratively in a group of four or five towards a common goal—to develop a product and present it. There were also individual tasks to be carried out, most particularly at the product designing stage.

As presented in Table 1, the first stage of the project is product planning in which students conducted a group discussion to discuss what kind of product to develop by exchanging ideas. At this stage, the primary goal was to identify the category of a product that they wish to develop (e.g., fashion, electronics, and furniture). Before conducting a group discussion, students were introduced to language expressions for negotiating, proposing, and explaining reasons to facilitate their discussion and exchange of ideas. After the discussion, each student was required to submit a brief reflection paper summarizing and reporting the results of their group discussion.

The second stage of the project is product designing. In this stage, students worked individually to design a product which fits into the product category selected as a group decision. Some of the major tasks involved reading authentic product descriptions on internet shopping websites such as *Amazon.com* and *ebay*, and writing a product description.

At the product development meeting stage, students shared each of their products and selected the best product to be used for their final presentation through negotiating and considering the market value of each product.

Finally, at the product presentation stage, students prepared a PowerPoint slide and presented their product by explaining the nature of the product with its specifications, target customers, and justifying the value of the product to persuade potential investors (i.e., peers) to vote for their product. Potential investors also write a brief comment on each of the products presented to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the product, which would be used for post-presentation discussion to evaluate the product and find ways to improve its quality.

## Discussion

One major principle in designing a project is to use a socially meaningful topic to provide a learning context which is comparable to real-life situations. In the case of the project example presented above, product development simulates a common business context and is also relevant to students' major—business administration. Learning in a socially meaningful context as provided by PBLI can help students to be aware of real life problems and develop their ability to resolve conflicts through negotiation, and make thoughtful decisions in which language plays an important role (Kloppenborg & Baucus, 2004).

Another important principle is that tasks to be completed in a project have to be seamlessly connected; completion of each task leads to successful completion of the project. This is where PBLI is fundamentally different from SBI in terms of task design. In PBLI, the objective of completing tasks is to achieve a project goal, and language skills and knowledge to be learned are all embedded within, while providing an *authentic* communicative context with a genuine purpose which necessitates the learning and use of language knowledge and skills. Thus, in contrast to SBI, language learning in PBLI is much more explicitly tied to fulfilling specific communicative needs and social goals, and students can clearly see the value and necessity of language learning, which feeds into their motivation (Bottoms & Webb, 1998). Furthermore, because of the nature of task design in PBLI, students are more likely to be able to transfer learned knowledge and skills to other similar social contexts (Blank, 1997; Bottoms & Webb, 1998). Although whether or not PBLI can in fact better ensure the transfer of learned skills and knowledge is an empirical question, the implications of the pedagogical rationale behind PBLI are worth being noted.

It is also important to note that SBI clearly lacks empirical evidence pointing to the

transfer of learned skills to real-life situations, and as the theoretical foundation of SBI, SAT is highly under-researched (Dekeyser, 2007). SAT also tends to treat social context of learning rather lightly, because of its strong affiliation with cognitive based theory of learning. Hence, despite the popularity of SBI, it is a reasonable question to ask whether or not learning through SBI can effectively prepare students to use gained language skills and knowledge in real-life communicative situations. This is not to say that SAT has no theoretical value. For instance, Parziale and Fischer (2009) argued that SAT can be applied in explaining language learning in classroom settings. However, the theory needs to be further developed and empirically investigated to provide a solid foundation to inform pedagogical practice. Thus, it is perhaps time to place SBI under close scrutiny by questioning its expected and actual pedagogical outcomes, while considering a potential alternative such as PBLI. In addition, language instructors and textbook writers should critically examine their fundamental assumptions about language learning and be aware of a variety of language learning theories available in SLA and other language education related research. In particular, neo-social interactionist views of language learning presented in this article can be a good starting point in an attempt to reevaluate our currently dominant language teaching practice, which is essentially based on cognitivist SLA.

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## **Appendix: The dream product project assignment sheet**

### **The Dream Product Project**

**Project Overview:** In the next two weeks, you will prepare a 10 minute group presentation to present your original product to the class. This project includes planning, designing, and presenting your original product. Your classmates assume the role of your potential investors. Your aim is to convince the investor(s) that your product is a great product for investment. Be specific about product specifications—the investors may ask questions about you product and you need to know everything about your product.

**Work with your group members and complete the following:**

- 1. Product Planning (Group)** - Discuss with your group members and share ideas to develop a product. What kind of product would you want to develop and present?
- 2. Product Designing (Individual)** - Design the product (drawing) like the example below. Use an A4 size paper to draw a sketch of your product. Once you finish designing the project, make a list of product specs (e.g., function, size, weight). Write a short product description based on the list that you created and provide additional details of the product. Check Amazon.com, ebay, or other shopping websites to learn how product descriptions are written.

### **3. Product Development Meeting (Group)**

Share your product with your group members, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the product and decide on a product that you will use for your group presentation.

### **4. Product Presentation (Group)**

The goal of this group presentation is to convince your classmates (investors) that your product has a high level of market value so that you can get investment from them.

#### **Requirements:**

You must use Microsoft PowerPoint to prepare slides for your group presentation.

Your presentation should include:

1. Product Information – What is the product? What does it do?
2. Product Uniqueness: What is the unique thing about the product?
3. Target Market: Who are the target consumers? (Age group, Male or Female, and any other characteristics).
4. Price: How much does it cost?
5. Marketing: How do you sell the product?

#### **Note:**

For each stage of the project, there will be a number of small tasks to complete. Each task will be carried out based on the task sheet with detailed instructions. Make sure to read the task sheet carefully to understand the requirements and purpose of each task.