

# 8 Becoming a more active and creative language learner with digital tools

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## Abstract

Interacting with peers can be difficult for some students, due to their personality as well as to their learning styles. This paper shows how the Task-Based Approach (TBA) can be implemented and how digital resources can be used in language teaching and learning to enhance the students' experience and foster autonomy. To do so, I describe tasks I implemented for university students at A2/B1 level Japanese – Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) – delivered to a group of mainly Chinese students. Chinese students seem to be reluctant to speak up and share their opinions in class (Wu, 2015), which needed to be addressed in language classes. In order to encourage them to be more active and creative, TBA was deployed to help students perform tasks while using authentic materials, including online materials as well as digital tools to give more exposure to natural language. By adopting this method, language learning can be more heuristic for learners to achieve their learning goals, and students can be more engaged and motivated in tasks. At the same time, it was observed that students became more proactive to use pre-learned language in more contextualised situations and showed more originality as a result.

**Keywords:** task-based, digital resources, motivation, creativity, autonomy.

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**How to cite this chapter:** Kurose, M. (2019). Becoming a more active and creative language learner with digital tools. In N. Becerra, R. Biasini, H. Magedera-Hofhansl & A. Reimão (Eds), *Innovative language teaching and learning at university: a look at new trends* (pp. 63-71). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2019.32.903>

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Rationale

The Japanese language attracts many Chinese speakers compared to other nationals as it has adopted Chinese characters, which gives a certain advantage to Chinese speakers (Tamaoka, 2014, p. 432). From my classroom observations, however, Chinese students seem to be rather passive learners who find it difficult to share opinions and hesitate to ask questions and participate in discussions. This may be due to “the extremely exam-oriented” culture (Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009, p. 69), whereby the purpose of learning is to pass exams by memorising and practising what is presented in class to anticipate what may come up in the exam. This seems to be one of the contributing factors for certain East-Asian students losing motivation when learning languages (Taguchi et al., 2009). Wu’s (2015) study also shows how Chinese learners, especially those from the mainland, are expected to sit in class quietly rather than actively participate. In this paper, I demonstrate how, by using a TBA to devise tasks that encourage students to interact with each other and create an environment in which students feel comfortable, this passive learning behaviour can be gently overcome and students can be encouraged to vocalise their opinions and ask questions.

### 1.2. Task-based approach

Johnson (1995) highlights how the significance of the learners’ academic, cultural, and personal background affects conversational competencies in class and argues that teaching should encompass the learners’ *real operating conditions*, i.e. real-life situations. This seems particularly relevant in this case, where due to cultural factors of the type discussed by Johnson (1995), the Chinese students are reluctant to participate in simple oral communication in class, even creating own sentences from prompts, describing photos, let alone in discussions and debates. Therefore, a combination of the teaching methods of Presenting, Practising, and Producing (PPP) (Long, 2015) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) was adopted to foster a learning environment that would encourage working with peers to enhance oral communication and to self-correct.

TBLT is defined by Ellis (2003) as “teaching that is based entirely on tasks” (p. 351) and tasks are identified by six essential features:

- a task is a workplan,
- a task involves a primary focus on meaning,
- a task involves real-world processes of language use,
- a task can involve any of the four language skills,
- a task engages cognitive processes,
- a task has a clearly defined communicative outcome (Ellis, 2003, pp. 9-10).

According to Ellis (2003), “a task is a workplan” (p. 9) that has an intended outcome which is interrelated with PPP methods. PPP is more explicitly focussed on grammatical forms, whereas TBLT focusses on meaning (Willis, 1996). By combining both approaches, students are encouraged to produce output while experimenting with language to work towards a goal. Learners, therefore, are given tasks which motivate and promote more active participation. Tasks given in class are contextualised, for example, within situations that learners may encounter outside the classroom. However, rather than acquiring the particular language elements that the teacher intends, there is a danger that the focus of learning may go astray during completion of the task. To bridge this gap, the approach presented here has been developed. It is referred to as TBA to differentiate it from TBLT, which, as discussed, combines features of TBLT and PPP. More precisely, PPP is grammar and structure practice which Asian students are familiar with and it transfers that knowledge in a more contextualised way. TBA, in this case, provides more opportunities to practise oral communication skills and to use language in more ad-hoc or authentic situations.

## 2. Tasks

Four task-based projects incorporating digital tools were designed for Asian exchange students who study Japanese in the UK. These are described in the

following sections. The students were predominantly speakers of Chinese who had four contact hours weekly. Their language level was between CEFR A2 and B1.

### 2.1. Task 1: about yourself

Figure 1. Fakebook



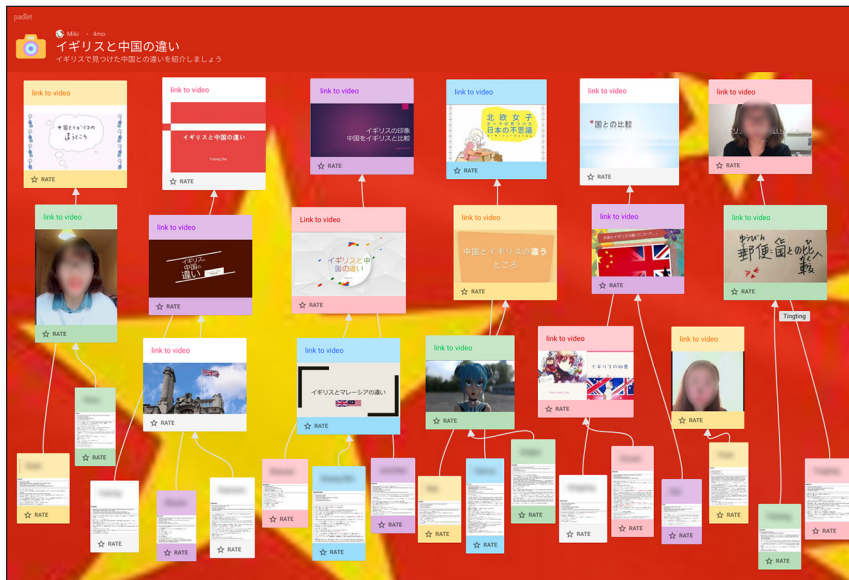
A website called Fakebook ([www.classtools.net/FB/home-page](http://www.classtools.net/FB/home-page), Figure 1) was used to write a blog online as a more realistic way to introduce themselves. Students were then asked to view the pages of at least three peers with whom they

did not usually associate, and give comments on their posts. Students needed to use the plain form of Japanese (casual tone of language) to reinforce their learning. Students were given further tasks to write and interact with fellow students, such as sharing their feelings regarding studying abroad and their plans for Christmas, where they could ask questions to peers in a more spontaneous manner.

Regular feedback, comments, and corrections were posted by the teacher. The online presentation board software Padlet (padlet.com) was used to access each other's Fakebook pages as it requires a password to write comments.

## 2.2. Task 2: cultural comparison

Figure 2. Padlet



In this task, students were asked to produce a video on cultural similarities and differences, in this case between China/Malaysia and the UK. Students made a video on their mobile phones, used video editing tools, PowerPoint presentations,

and subtitle editing tools, which showed real engagement with the task. Pre-learned language elements were fully used to complete the task and even as yet unlearned grammatical elements were used as students were eager to improve their videos. Videos and teacher feedback were collated using Padlet (Figure 2), and all students' videos were stored in the university OneDrive and then linked to the Padlet board to share.

In class, all students viewed the videos, which also served as a good listening exercise, and shared their opinions and feelings, as well as giving suggestions for improvement.

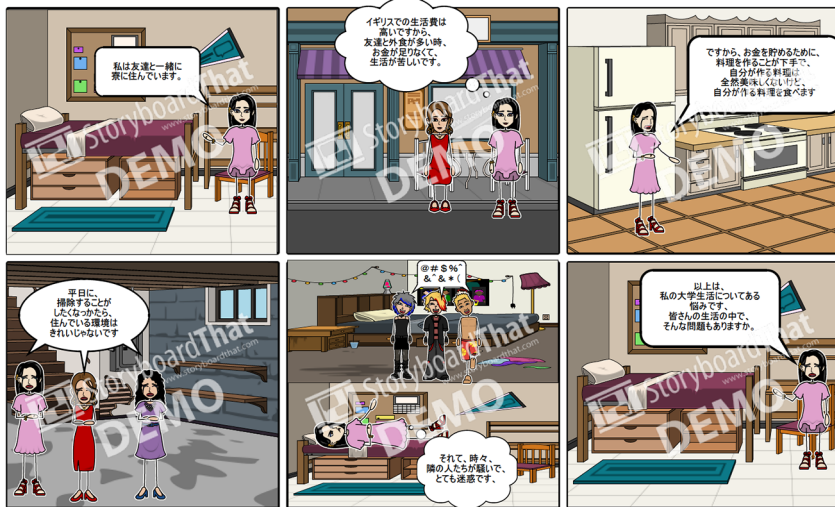
### **2.3. Task 3: travel**

The students organised a fictional trip within a set budget for a small group holiday, giving reasons for the trip, the itinerary, useful tips, and a breakdown of the budget. The final presentation was a PowerPoint video to narrate their travel plans. Students were told to use authentic online information (e.g. <https://travel.yahoo.co.jp/>) to plan, and all discussions with peers were in Japanese throughout. Therefore, ad-hoc use of language was encouraged, and planning the trip also fostered problem solving.

The students' presentations were viewed by peers in class, and some students actually went on the trip they planned. This proves that the task was beneficial for the students, and their language skills were used for a real purpose.

### **2.4. Task 4: university life**

In this task, students were asked to describe daily problems in university life in the UK. They were asked to use a digital resource online ([www.storyboardthat.com](http://www.storyboardthat.com), Figure 3) to display a problem, and peers were asked to give advice and/or solutions in Japanese. The digital resource was a form of story board which is similar to manga (Japanese comic books) thus incorporating a cultural element to the task. The storyboard had six scenes which described problems, and students had to think about how to form, summarise, or elaborate on a story.

Figure 3. Storyboard<sup>2</sup>

Informal discussions took place after the initial presentation of the problem, which encouraged students to give advice and find solutions using colloquial language. Students welcomed this chance to experiment using informal and colloquial language which may be heard in Japanese anime (cartoons) or dramas in order to express their spur-of-the-moment feelings and opinions. This positive feedback was captured through an end of semester questionnaire.

### 3. Outcomes and reflection

The initial aim of TBA was to get students, especially Chinese, involved and interacting more in class to make the most of their language learning experience. By using TBA, it was hoped that they would become more active language learners. As a result of combining TBA and various types of technology, students were more motivated, engaged, and became more proactive about their learning.

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They used textbooks and online materials to complete tasks and critically sourced and selected information needed. Through the completion of the tasks, the students commented in the survey as well as in their module evaluation, that the tasks made them use more grammar and vocabulary, they gained more confidence in speaking, the variety of tasks were enjoyable, and they learned skills beyond language learning such as editing videos.

Methods of presentation were kept to a minimum, e.g. videos and PowerPoint presentations. However, the students went beyond expectations by taking their audience into account. To help listeners understand unknown vocabulary and phrases in the presentation, they added subtitles and also ensured coherence of content. The students also added, in their feedback, that they felt that they had practised more oral skills in the pre-recorded way of presentation, as they could rectify their own mistakes and practise their pronunciation until they were satisfied.

## **4. Conclusions**

We recognise the importance of embedding practical experience in language learning task design in order to enable students to transfer their knowledge to suit their needs (Long, 2015, p. 68). As shown in the above study, carefully designed tasks can motivate students. As students became more involved in tasks, they took full ownership of their learning and worked actively in small groups in achieving goals. Anecdotally, some students even went on the trips they planned in class. In my experience with this cohort, the TBA enabled students' confidence to experiment with language, to show their originality, and to share opinions in group communication. Learners' problem solving and reflection skills were also required during the process of completing tasks by thought-out editing of final videos and presentations. This heuristic approach to teaching and learning was beneficial overall for Chinese learners as it helped them to become more active language learners and able to use language for their needs in the real world, to share their opinions, and to overcome the exam-oriented passive learning style to which they had become accustomed to in their home countries.



## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my students from the Ningbo campus of University of Nottingham.

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association  
Voillans, France, [info@research-publishing.net](mailto:info@research-publishing.net)

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**Innovative language teaching and learning at university: a look at new trends**  
**Edited by Nelson Becerra, Rosalba Biasini, Hanna Magedera-Hofhansl, and Ana Reimão**

**Publication date:** 2019/05/06

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Typeset by Research-publishing.net  
Cover design by © Raphaël Savina ([raphael@savina.net](mailto:raphael@savina.net))

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-36-8 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-37-5 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-35-1 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)

Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.

A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

**Legal deposit, UK:** British Library.

**Legal deposit, France:** Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: mai 2019.

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