Approaches to Pedagogy, Part III
Traditional vs. Communicative & Task-based Activity Preferences based on Proficiency Level

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of an exploratory investigation into first-year Japanese university students' (N = 220) preferences among twelve pedagogical activities based on their English proficiency. Student proficiency levels are pre-intermediate (n = 73), intermediate (n = 74), and upper-intermediate (n = 73) based on a placement exam. A principal components analysis placed the six traditional activity variables into one factor and the communicative / task-based activity variables into two factors of three item each. Means comparisons between the components show statistically significant differences in the preference for *Small-group / team activities* for the intermediate and upper-intermediate students compared with the pre-intermediate students. The intermediate students, a sample representing 70% of the students in the department, prefer *Activities where I am moving around in the room* to the other two groups. *Grammar drills / practice* show a statistically significant decline in preference as ability increases. Finally, all of the communicative / task-based activities are ranked higher by the upper-intermediate students compared with the pre-intermediate students. The results and implications are discussed in relation to placement testing and selecting appropriate tasks based on student ability / placement level.

本稿では、英語能力に基づいた12の活動のうち、日本の大学一年生（N = 220）教授法の好み研究成果を報告する。理工系の大学や関西の主要私立大学の入学試験にもっとづいて、準中級（PI; n = 73)、中（IM; n = 74)、中の上（UI; n = 73）である。12活動のうち6つは、伝統的で一番為になる教室での、instructivist教育的活動と考えられるかもしれません（以下、TAS)、残りは（以後、C構成主義コミュニカティブ·ランゲージ·ティーチング（CLT）教育および/またはタスク·ベースの言語教育（TBLT）活動の構成要素と考えられるかもしれません（C/ TBAs)。結果は、PIの学生と比較して、IMやUIの学生のためのグループワークの好みにおいて、統計上重要なちがを示している。体を動かしながらの活動は、学生の過半数の典型である、PIとIMの学生の間で統計的有意性を示している。また、文法ドリル/練習は能力が上がるにつれて、統計上有意な減少を示しています。最後に、C/ TBAsのすべてはUIグループにより　高く位置づけられておりPIグループと比較して統計学的に有意な差を示しています。結果とその結果が暗示することについて議論します。

Keywords: CLT, EFL, pedagogy, placement level, socio-collaborative learning, TBLT, traditional methods, university students

Students' affective response to different pedagogical approaches is well known to EFL educators; therefore, the distinctions between traditional, teacher fronted classroom activities (TAs) and communicative language teaching methods and/or task-based activities (C/TBAs) are reported, As Hsu (2005) writes, "some learners like doing grammar and memorizing, others want to speak and role–play; while still others prefer reading and writing, but avoid speaking" (p. 55). However, the author is unaware of any research studies, which have investigated student pedagogical preferences based on English proficiency.

The results presented herein are from students (N = 220) in a single faculty who were in one of three course levels. The course levels are Pre-Intermediate (PI; n = 73), Intermediate (IM; n = 74) and Upper-Intermediate (UI; n = 73) as determined by a "TOEIC® -like placement test" (M. Shawback, pers. comm.). Students took the placement test at the same time as the entrance exam to enter the College of Science and Engineering at a large private university in the Kansai area of Japan. Since the students reported on were in the first semester of university, it should be noted that the results of the activity preferences may reflect activities from high school (HS) and/or junior high school (JHS). However, the results of this research may help educators and curriculum developers make more informed decisions based on ability level and activity preferences. It is hoped that this paper will add to the research literature on classroom pedagogical activities and preferences.

Social Constructivism, 'Flow', and Task-motivation

In the past several decades, there has been a move toward constructivist approaches to instruction, reflecting the theories of Vygotsky (1978), Dewey (1963), and Leont'ev (1978). Social constructivist theories involve "engaging students in problem solving...and co-operative activities" (Felix, 2005, pp. 19-20). Social constructivists approach learning tasks that "emphasize interpersonal, experiential, activity-based learning" (Felix, 2005, p. 29) as opposed to instructivist approaches, which are generally teacher-fronted.

According to Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh & Nakamura, 2005), there are eight aspects that characterize an activity or a task that provides enjoyment: First, we must have a chance of completing the task. That is, the task content and time constraints must both meet student ability level. Second, we must have an opportunity to concentrate on the activity.

Third, the task has a clear goal and fourth, immediate feedback is provided on task progress and completion. The fourth requirement stipulates that we must receive clear and unambiguous feedback on our progress and fifth, we are deeply but effortlessly involved in the task and forget about any worries or frustrations. Sixth, we have a sense of control over our actions. Seventh, concern for the self disappears when we are engaged in the activity. Finally, our sense of time is altered; we simply forget about time (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, p. 49).

Research by Egbert (2003) on Flow Theory and second language acquisition (SLA) shows "that teachers

can theoretically facilitate the flow experience for students by developing tasks that might lead to flow" (p. 513). In other words, from the perspective of SLA, "Flow Theory specifies the task conditions under which Flow can occur" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 82). Specifically, interactive, problem-solving and group-based activities with a clear goal and which require students to focus intently provide the four aspects that characterize the Flow experience: interest, focused attention, challenge, and control.

Dörnyei (2007) lists several aspects of teacher practice that are relevant to task-based teaching and the task-motivation of students that are conducive to creating the Flow experience:

1) Making learning stimulating and enjoyable.
2) Presenting tasks in a motivating way.
3) Setting specific learner goals.
4) Protecting the learners' self-esteem and increasing their self-confidence.
5) Creating learner autonomy. (p. 728)

Classroom teachers can make learning stimulating and enjoyable in several ways. Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) write about "the rewarding nature of group activities" (in Dörnyei, 2007, p.721). They state that the joy that students feel while performing activities with others and the success in achieving goals (task completion) are affective benefits of working with others. Brophy and Alleman (1991) wrote, "Other things being equal, activities that students are likely to enjoy (or at least find meaningful and worthwhile) are preferable to activities that students are not likely to enjoy" (p. 18). After more than twenty years, experts still emphasize the "enjoyable quality" of language learning tasks (Dörnyei, 2009a, p. 18). This paper explores differences of the 'enjoyable quality' of language learning activities based on the students' proficiency.

However, there are several classroom pedagogies and overlap amongst them is to be expected. There are also specific differences (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996) that can be recognized and preferences amongst them can be explored. Since it is well known that "(i)nstruction, tasks, and courses have a motivational structure" (Julkunen, 2001, p. 34), preferences amongst them based on their 'motivational structure' can be examined.

Classroom Pedagogies

Research on Tasks and Motivation in the JEFL Classroom

Additional research in the JEFL environment by Burden (2005) contrasted several TAs (lecture, translation, and grammar exercises) and C/TBAs (pair-work / group-work) and their perceived enjoyableness and usefulness by university students. The results indicate that several activities that are perceived as effective

were not perceived as enjoyable (e.g. *Memorizing vocabulary lists*, p. 7, Table 2). In addition, Ockert (2006, 2011) has found distinctions between TAs and C/TBAs based on principal components analysis (PCA) and reported on the relationship between activity type and learner EFL motives. Therefore, students like to engage in specific activities and may also do so based on EFL motives.

This paper adds to the literature on TAs and C/TBAs by reporting on non-English Japanese students' results for their preferences for pedagogical activities based on the activities' motivating aspect or enjoyableness, according to student ability. The author is unaware of any research into pedagogical preferences of learners of differing English ability level based on a placement exam. The researcher believes that current study will contribute to the growing body of literature on the topic of classroom activities and our understanding of student perceptions of specific activities as enjoyable or motivating based on a placement level analysis.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research Questions

The previous studies on TAs and C/TBAs and their motivational qualities / usefulness guide the present research. However, in this research project, three groups of first-year university students of differing levels of proficiency participated. The three levels of proficiency serve as independent variables. Twelve pedagogical activities serve as dependent variables. The research questions explored in this study are:

1. Do the students feel that different pedagogical activities are more motivating than others based on placement level?

2. Are the three factor groups of activities rated differently based on placement level?

Hypotheses

The following two conjectures are offered:

Hypothesis 1: The students in the three different levels will rank the individual activities differently.

Hypothesis 2: The participants in this survey will indicate differences in activity preference based on the three factor groups.

Methods

For this research project, the numerical format choices for each item are the numbers 1 to 5. It is important to remember when viewing means scores for each variable that those below '3' are, in fact, representing negative affect for these respondents. It is also important to consider that survey use in the JEFL environment

has a rather 'checkered' history. According to Reid (1990), students from different language and cultural backgrounds differ in the ways they respond to surveys. The author developed the scale used for this research before finding out about this phenomenon. However, appropriate measures were taken before analyzing the data (see Procedures, below).

Respondents

The participants were all first year students (N = 220) in communication classes in the College of Science and Engineering in a top-tier private university in Japan. Students in this college take a TOEIC®-like placement test and are streamed into their respective levels based on their scores relative to other students. The students who score in the lowest 15 percentile are placed in lower-intermediate (PI; n = 73) classes and those in the upper 15 percentile are placed in upper-intermediate (UI; n = 73) classes. Those in the middle 70 percentile are placed in intermediate (IM; n = 74) level classes. Three classes from each level were chosen at random for participation with the cooperation of their Communication I teachers. Female and foreign students account for a very small percentage of the total respondents.

Instrument

The scale used in this research was designed with Japanese learners in mind; the items / activities were selected based on JEFL learners' classroom and learning situation. The Classroom Activities Questionnaire lists twelve classroom activities commonly used in foreign language classrooms. The first six are generally used for instructivist or teacher-fronted classrooms and are referred to as TAs. The latter six involve a more active student role, are socio-collaborative (group learning based) and are referred to as C/TBAs. No distinction was made on this survey to indicate to the students that the twelve activities were hypothesized to either one or the other. This questionnaire uses a Likert-type format from 1 to 5, corresponding to (1) strongly dislike, (2) dislike, (3) neutral, (4) like, and (5) strongly like (please see the Appendix). The Cronbach's *alpha* is .76 for the twelve items, which indicates that it is not a uni-dimensional scale. Rather, there are two or more sub-scales measuring different constructs.

Procedures

The author's colleagues administered the surveys to students in three classes from each level in the fourth week of the first semester. The author was present to assist in distributing the surveys, answer questions, collect the surveys, and insure that they were filled out. The survey was administered in a paper version and students were encouraged to ask any questions of their instructor after the instructions were read aloud. The

students were given as much time as necessary to complete the survey on a voluntary basis. However, no students opted to not fill in the questionnaire. The students were given confidentiality and assured that their course grade would not be affected in any way for their participation or non-participation. Due to the issue raised by Reid (1990), above, student response from all three ability levels who chose the '3' option across all items was removed to create a more robust sample. Therefore, 14, 17, and 15 students' results were removed from the PI, IM, and UI groups, respectively, before analysis.

Results and Discussion

The collected data were initially analyzed using the SPSS software, and confirmed using the *MyStat* software. The descriptive statistics for the twelve items, minimum / maximum (from 1 to 5) and rankings are in Table 1. In the column for *M*, the lowest score is 2.96 for *Grammar exercises*. The three highest activity means are for *Lecture* (3.77), *Small-group / team activities* (3.94), and Item 12 *Pair-work* (3.74). The skewness results indicate that variables 2, 4, and 8 have relatively normal distributions; variables 9, 10, and 11 are to the right of the mean. This would be expected since the minimum for each was a '2', indicating that none of the respondents chose 1 (strongly dislike) for either of these activities.

The ranking of the items based on mean score and the minimum / maximum for each item by proficiency level reveal the perceived enjoyableness or motivating aspect of the twelve activities. As can be seen in Table 2, none of the C/TBAs received a '1' from the IM students and only *Info-seek activities* received a '1' from among the UI students.

Table 1. The Twelve Activity Min / Max and Ranking by English Placement Exam Level

Student level:	PI (*n* = 73)		IM (*n* = 74)		UI (*n* = 73)	
Activity:	Min / Max	rank	Min / Max	rank	Min / Max	rank
1) Lecture	1 / 5	1	2 / 5	3	1 / 5	2
2) Listening exercises	2 / 5	4	2 / 5	6	1 / 5	9
3) Dialogue / reading	1 / 5	9	1 / 5	9	1 / 5	8
4) Writing exercises	1 / 5	11	1 / 5	10	1 / 5	10
5) Translation exercises	1 / 5	11	1 / 5	8	1 / 5	8
6) Grammar drills / practice	1 / 5	10	1 / 5	11	1 / 4	11
7) Small-group activities	1 / 5	2	2 / 5	1	2 / 5	1
8) Info-seek activities	1 / 5	6	2 / 5	5	1 / 5	6
9) Problem solving activities	2 / 5	7	2 / 5	5	2 / 5	4
10) Activities while moving	2 / 5	8	2 / 5	4	2 / 5	7
11) Challenging tasks	2 / 5	5	2 / 4	7	2 / 5	5
12) Pair work	1 / 5	3	2 / 5	2	2 / 5	3

The Twelve Activity Rankings and Differences by English Ability Level

Based on these results, the fact that *any* statistically significant differences exist amongst the items based on ability level for samples so small was a surprise. This study did not test for the effect of any specific pedagogical intervention. Rather, it tested for differences in preferences for activities between groups of students based on ability, not differences of a specific group before and after applying an experiment. There are several differences between the level of enjoyableness / motivation of specific activities between the three groups of students. The statistical significance findings indicate that these differences are not based on chance alone. Therefore, the effect size was calculated for the six statistically significance differences.

The PCA Component Results by Placement Level

While all three groups ranked *Pair work* and *Small-group activities* in the top three (with *Lecture*), the IM students found both slightly more enjoyable and motivating than the PI and UI groups. These results are similar to those reported previously for two cohorts of IM students (see Ockert, 2006, 2011). This suggests that educators and curriculum developers should take note of the fact that the more advanced the students, the more they may like or need 'real world' communicative opportunities or in-class scenarios. Of specific interest for the theories tested is the homogeneity of the sample. While the students may come from different backgrounds demographically, they are for all intents and purposes very similar. It would be expected that

Table 2. The Twelve Activity *M*, *SD*, and *M* Score Differences by Placement Level

Student level:	PI (n = 73)		IM (n = 74)		UI (n = 73)	
Activity:	*M (SD)*	PI / IM Difference.	*M (SD)*	IM / UI Difference	*M (SD)*	UI / PI Difference
1) Lecture	3.79 (0.87)	.13	3.66 (0.78)	.20	3.86 (0.85)	.07
2) Listening exercises	3.40 (0.89)	.02	3.38 (0.93)	.15	3.23 (0.92)	.17
3) Dialogue / reading	3.22 (0.90)	.08	3.14 (0.75)	.20	3.34 (0.92)	.14
4) Writing exercises	3.15 (0.86)	.06	3.09 (0.76)	.07	3.16 (0.90)	.01
5) Translation exercises	3.15 (0.66)	.01	3.16 (0.64)	.18	3.34 (0.73)	.19
6) Grammar drills / practice	3.16 (0.71)	.20	2.96 (0.83)	.19	2.77 (0.87)	.39**
7) Small-group activities	3.78 (0.82)	.25*	4.03 (0.74)	.02	4.01 (0.70)	.23*
8) Info-seek activities	3.32 (0.66)	.11	3.43 (0.68)	.06	3.49 (0.75)	.17
9) Problem solving activities	3.30 (0.54)	.13	3.43 (0.64)	.12	3.55 (0.73)	.25*
10) Activities while moving	3.26 (0.69)	.36**	3.62 (0.84)	.21	3.41 (0.80)	.15
11) Challenging tasks	3.34 (0.69)	.11	3.23 (0.51)	.30*	3.53 (0.82)	.19
12) Pair work	3.60 (0.86)	.22	3.82 (0.67)	.03	3.79 (0.85)	.19

Note. **p < .01; *p < .05

all three groups answer similarly – yet they did not. The three PCA factors, Cronbach's alpha reliability estimates, and explanations are as follows:

Factor 1: Traditional Activities (α = .71)

0.726 Item 1: Lecture

0.621 Item 2: Listening exercises (CD, tape or DVD)

0.705 Item 3: Dialogue / reading practice from the text

0.664 Item 4: Writing exercises

0.421 Item 5: Translation exercises

0.424 Item 6: Grammar drills / practice

Factor 2: C/TBAs Active Pair / Teamwork (α = .61)

0.771 Item 7: Small-group / team activities

0.563 Item 10: Activities where I am moving around in the room

0.770 Item 12: Pair-work

Factor 3: C/TBAs Brains (α = .57)

0.653 Item 8: Info-seek / finding information activities

0.763 Item 9: Problem-solving activities

0.680 Item 11: Tasks that are intellectually challenging

The evidence herein demonstrates that students of different ability levels may need, and therefore desire, different pedagogies. Furthermore, Dörnyei (2009b) writes that learners should be offered "ample opportunities to participate in genuine L2 interaction" (p. 41, emphasis in original). Therefore, students need

Table 3. The Differences between the Component Groups by English Ability Level

Factor groups:	Factor 1: TAs Listening, Writing & Grammar	Stat. Sig. F1 vs F2	Factor 2: C/TBAs *Active Pair / Team work*	Stat. Sig. F2 vs F3	Factor 3: C/TBAs Brains	Stat. Sig. F3 vs F1
All students	M = 3.30	p <.05	M = 3.70	p <.05	M = 3.40	na
PI (n = 73)	M = 3.31	na	M = 3.53	na	M = 3.32	na
IM (n = 74)	M = 3.23	p <.01	M = 3.83	p <.01	M = 3.37	na
UI (n = 73)	M = 3.28	p <.10	M = 3.73	na	M = 3.53	p <.10

Note. The significance level for this analysis was set at p = < .10 as this is an exploratory study (Cohen, 1992).

at least a partner in order to communicate in any kind of 'genuine' L2 interaction.

Listening to the teacher, CD, or even watching a movie is not sufficient to supply the type of communicative opportunities that constitute genuine L2 interaction. This may be why the more advanced the students; the more they seem to favor C/TBAs.

TAs vs. C/TBAs: Social Constructivism, 'Flow', and Task-motivation

The second research question asked *Do the students from the three different ability levels have different preferences for pedagogical activities?* This question lead to Hypothesis 2: *The participants in this survey will show differences in activity preference based on ability level*. Before looking at this issue more closely, it is worth mentioning that none of the C/TBAs received a score of '1' from any of the IM level students, whereas all of the TAs received a '1' from the UI level students. What can we infer from this? As a classroom teacher with years of experience at all levels of education in Japan, the author believes that the relationship between language learning, peer interaction, Flow, and task-motivation accounts for the relationship of the variables in Factor 2: C/TBAs *Active Pair / Teamwork*. Further research including a qualitative segment would help us understand this relationship.

Yet, variable 1 *Lecture* (*Listen to the teacher and stay in my seat*) also received a high mean score for enjoyableness and / or motivational aspect(s). What could account for this? One reason that comes to mind is that the students are simply apathetic toward learning English. Finally, C/TBAs items 9 Problem solving activities, 10 *Activities where I am moving around in the room*, and 11 *Tasks that are intellectually challenging* did not receive a '1' for Strongly Dislike from any student from any ability level.

Conclusions

Implications for Placement Testing, Pedagogy, and Curriculum Development

The results should not lead readers to infer that having students engage in the activities that the students chose as more motivating / enjoyable will, in fact, increase their motivation to study English. The relationship of effectiveness and enjoyableness / motivating aspect of pedagogical activities has not been 'firmly established. In fact, it may not necessarily be a linear relationship but may be circular or even self-reinforcing.

What curriculum developers and classroom educator need to be aware of is "the possibility of problems arising from a mismatch of classroom activities with student expectations" (Green, 1993, p. 8). For example, students who have passed a university entrance exam will almost certainly have mastered basic grammar. To place such students in a class in which the teacher places an emphasis on grammatical rules / activities will almost certainly lead to student frustration, boredom, and burnout. Non-English majors

How are these results to be interpreted? For example, are these results generalizable to the larger body of

university students in Japan in general? Lazaraton (2005) cautions that using parametric procedures may lead researchers to overgeneralize their results and to make claims regarding their findings that exceed what is permitted by their methodologies (p. 219). However, according to Dörnyei (2011), "researchers should also not to be afraid to extend research interpretations to a general class or population if (there are) reasons to assume that the results apply" (p. 213). In Japanese universities, the vast majority of students who must study English are majoring in subjects other than English. Therefore, the results presented in this paper may very well apply to university English students in Japan in general. Teachers may wish to experiment with various activities to see what works and what does not work so well in their specific situation. For example, can we combine activities that students perceive as enjoyable / motivating with essential activities that are perceived as useful? I.e. make a vocabulary memorization activity a group activity.

Limitations and Future Research

Admittedly, the current study has several limitations. First, several of the activities on the survey are not exclusive. For example, translation requires a source, a text or other written document as well as writing skills. Furthermore, it is more important to recognize this study's sampling limitations. This sample was drawn from the students, overwhelmingly male, of a highly ranked university. Therefore, since the students who answered this survey are a sample of convenience, the results may not generalize to the population of Japanese university students as a whole (see Brown, 2006). However, these students come from varied demographic backgrounds and this should be taken into consideration when interpreting these results for practical applications in the classroom. Yet, this study involved students from a highly homogenous group and further research is needed to determine the extent to which their pedagogical activity preferences would be similar or different to students elsewhere. Gender could play a role in activity preference; future research should take this into consideration and report the results accordingly.

There are several questions which could be addressed in future studies. For example, *What could be the reason why some students prefer one pedagogical approach over another? Could the reason be the relevance of the material to her life now, or future goals for language use? Are educators using* '*level appropriate*' *pedagogies, materials, and methodologies in the classroom? Is this a* '*chicken and the egg*' *syndrome?* In other words, *Which comes first, the desire to engage in specific activities or the level of achievement? Does one cause the other?* Using a mixed methods approach utilizing open-ended questions would help answer the question of why students may prefer certain pedagogical activities. The findings in this paper of a survey of pedagogical activities are by no means conclusive, and it should not be assumed or inferred from these results that any specific activity in and of itself leads to an increase or decrease in proficiency. The author hopes that

classroom teachers and curriculum developers may benefit from the information presented herein. It would be wonderful if other researchers explored survey differences as well and shared their students' preferred activities with the broader community of language researchers and teachers worldwide.

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Author Bio

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Appendix

What classroom activities do you enjoy or find motivating?

Circle the number on the right that best matches your opinion.

1 = strongly dislike, 2 = dislike, 3 = neutral, 4 = like, 5 = strongly like

1) Lecture (Listen to the teacher and stay in my seat)

2) Listening exercises (using a cd, tape or DVD)

3) Dialogue / reading practice from the text

4) Writing exercises

5) Translation exercises

6) Grammar drills / practice

7) Small-group / team activities

8) Info-seek / finding information activities

9) Problem-solving activities

10) Activities where I am moving around in the room

11) Tasks that are intellectually challenging

12) Pair-work