

# 3PS, TASK-BASED LEARNING AND THE JAPANESE LEARNER

*Mika Tanasarnsanee  
Assumption University*

## Abstract

*The 3Ps approach has traditionally been used to teach Japanese to speakers of other languages (JLT), outside of Japan. The writer suggests an alternative approach to learning Japanese - Task-based learning. Task-based learning is popularly used in teaching English as a Foreign Language. This report summarises the findings of a work in progress that attempted to investigate to what extent Task-based learning was more effective than the 3Ps approach in the teaching of Japanese as a foreign language in Thailand.*

## Introduction

Japanese is a language spoken as a first language only in Japan. The number of people learning Japanese outside of Japan is expanding, especially in Asia. Japanese is not a global language like English, but there are more than 2 million people who are learning Japanese abroad and 72 percent of them are in Asia.

Despite the large number of people learning Japanese outside of Japan, Japanese teachers have still based their methodology of teaching Japanese to speakers of other languages (JLT) on traditional approaches. Since English has the largest number of learners all over the world and has a widely recognised variety of teaching approaches, I decided to investigate if applying a Task-based approach to teaching Japanese as a foreign language would be more effective than the traditional 3Ps approach that is very popular in Japan. However, before presenting the findings of the study, a brief explanation of what task-based learning entails is given below.

## Tasks and a dominant approach in JLT

Tasks in language teaching will be briefly defined as goal-oriented activities which enable learners to interact in the target language. They are regarded as effective communicative activities because they provide learners with natural contexts of language use and help them improve accuracy and fluency.

Teachers of Japanese language are aware of the importance of communicative activities. But, the uses of task-based activities have not been widely adopted yet in Japan. Usually, communicative activities appear in the production stage of the 3Ps



approach; a sequence of Presentation-Practice-Production. There is a focus on forms which later shifts to an emphasis on fluency. This approach is accepted and popular among Japanese language teachers because they feel that the 3Ps approach provides learners with clear targets to be achieved. Furthermore, the approach allows grammar and vocabulary items to be taught in a systematic and orderly fashion.

However, I think the 3Ps approach is not without its disadvantages, especially when it is used to teach Japanese abroad. For example, most Thai university students majoring in Japanese learn at the beginner level in their freshman year, and they are expected to be able to read the newspapers and write business letters in the Japanese language when they graduate from university. There are many forms to be learnt, but few chances to use these forms outside the classroom. In this context, if the teacher follows the sequence of the 3Ps approach, the final stage is often omitted because it is considered too time-consuming. However, for learners outside Japan, the classroom is usually the only place where students communicate in the target language and have real experiences using the language. Providing natural contexts in classroom is therefore very important so that they can practise using the language.

Based on these observations, I was interested in exploring the following questions:

1. Is the 3Ps approach relevant to the learners' needs?
2. If classroom activities are designed mainly with tasks, how will students respond to them? Do the tasks benefit them? If so, how?

## Research Methodology

Designing tasks for a language class using the Task-based approach, the typical sequence being pre-task, task, and post-task, did not seem too difficult since I myself taught two pre-intermediate conversation classes. Each class was composed of approximately 25 students. In my study, I used two different teaching approaches: one class was taught using the Task-based approach, and the other, with the 3Ps approach. I taught both classes on the same day for eight weeks using the same syllabuses, teaching materials and teaching aids. The only difference was in the teaching approach.

In the 3Ps class, for example, when I taught new vocabulary items, I showed students flash cards, and I provided meanings and models of correct pronunciation, and asked students to repeat the pronunciation of the word until I was satisfied. In the Task-based class, I divided the class into 5 or 6 groups of 3-4 students, and handed each group the flash cards at random so that all groups had several cards that were different from others. I asked students to check the meaning of the words on their cards, and compose short stories using all the words provided. While they were engaged in their tasks, I monitored them, and provided help, if they needed it, acting as a facilitator. After the task, all the groups were asked to explain to the class the meaning of the words and to relate their stories.



## Data

Data was collected from my interviews with seven native Japanese teachers who were invited to sit in my class and observe my students. I also collected data from questionnaires which I had given out to the teachers and students from my classes. The invited teachers observed my classes six times. All the students in both classes were later asked to write comments about their classes, immediately after the last class.

## Analysis

Comments from students and teachers mainly related to these four features: Teaching style, Students' participation, Psychological filters, and Students' focuses.

### Results from the 3Ps Approach

#### *Teaching style*

There were some positive comments from teachers who used the 3Ps approach. They felt my students could attend class without feelings of anxiety since the teacher provided the necessary vocabulary and grammatical items in advance. Despite the teachers' views, there were contradictory comments from the students of the 3Ps classes such as "There were too many words", "Teacher spoke too fast" and "Topics were too difficult to understand".

#### *Participation and Psychological filters*

Some of the teachers thought that my students enjoyed the class activities greatly but the majority did not answer the teachers' questions voluntarily. Students said that they felt stressed and embarrassed if they had to answer the teacher because they were afraid of losing face by making mistakes.

#### *Focuses*

Teachers felt that students who were taught using the 3Ps approach were given more language practice. But some teachers doubted whether 3Ps students really understood the meaning of the vocabulary they were taught as the learning focus seemed to be more on forms.

### Results from the Task-based approach

#### *Teaching style and participation*

Many teachers commented that almost all the students participated to class activities throughout the lessons. Comments from the students about tasks were quite positive, such as "Activities were interesting", "Tasks made difficult things easier", "I paid attention more so that I could find the answers", etc.



### *Psychological filters and focuses*

Like the students taught using the 3Ps approach, the Task-based students also mentioned the fear of making errors in front of others, but there were several comments that they developed more confidence later through the task-based activities. This was interesting because such comments were hardly found in the 3Ps class. The majority of the Task-based students felt that they were relaxed during pair/group work. They mentioned that this relief reduced the pressure to perform well.

The following comment from a teacher revealed the differences in the psychology between two classes. She wrote:

*Students in the 3Ps class seemed not to like to take risks, but I felt there was a different attitude in the Task-based class. I observed some Task-based students starting to talk in Japanese although they would stop in mid sentence, finding that they didn't know how to say words. However, they seemed eager to convey their opinion without worrying about their linguistic limitations.*

### **Comment**

Both students and teachers pointed out some disadvantages of using Task-based learning. For example, students felt that there were few opportunities for them to receive feedback about their language accuracy. Some students also claimed that they were uncomfortable working in pairs or doing group work.

### **Conclusion**

Based on these findings, it may be suggested that Task-based learning could be effective in raising learners' awareness about language use. The learners' psychological filters are reduced in learning and their participation in activities increased. However, this study does not seek to promote one teaching approach over another. It simply suggests that teachers need to find the best balance between meaning-focused activities and form-focused feedback.

Since the study is a work in progress and was conducted in a short period of only eight weeks, there were some limitations to the study. For example, it would have been interesting to have been able to examine the relationship of the two approaches with the learners' performance.

Despite the limitations in time, the findings from this small study however did indicate that applying the Task-based approach in the Japanese language classroom outside of Japan provides learners with real experiences of communication with the target language. Such experiences are especially important and appropriate in situations where access to the target language is limited.

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Mika Tanasarnsanee currently teaches on the Business Japanese Language programme at Assumption University of Thailand. Her research interests include task-based classroom learning, materials development and teacher training in Japanese as a Foreign Language. She is an MA (ELT) student in the I.E.L.E. currently finishing her thesis.

[artmtn@au.ac.th](mailto:artmtn@au.ac.th)