The Sandwich Production Method: Shifting the Paradigm from Passive to Productive

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This article highlights the benefits of a "Sandwich Production Method", a production-oriented approach to English instruction at the tertiary level. It is designed to address some of the long-standing issues that have been recognized in the Japanese EFL context, particularly the lack of a holistic approach to English teaching and learning, especially insufficient output opportunities, and students' passive learning style. This paper discusses the theoretical foundations of the method and describes its practical aspects, which will be followed by an example task. The benefits of implementing this method in the classroom are presented based on class observations, which suggest a positive effect on cognitive engagement of the part of the learners. While this method is, for now, intended for university classes, it is hoped to reach wider EFL contexts in Japan.

For decades, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been articulating the importance of promoting learners' communicative English competence (Stewart, 2009; Tanabe, 2004). Since the introduction of the "Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities" in the Course of Study in 2003, various revisions have been made to emphasize the development of practical and communicative English skills in learners (Tanabe, 2004). By 2013, employing terminology such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Learning (TBL) under the umbrella term of

Active Learning in the revised policies, MEXT called for major educational reforms in junior/high school English education, including the 'English as the Medium of Instruction' movement (McMurray, 2018).

In the final instalment of reforms proposed in 2018, the Active Learning concept was officially introduced to be implemented in classrooms for almost all subjects to motivate students to "independently identify problems and solutions through debate and presentations" (McMurray, 2018), and consequently, the emphasis on the concept of Active Learning to promote both in-depth learning and self-regulated learning has extended to English education at the tertiary level (Mizokami, 2014). In terms of instruction, this had meant a transition from traditional grammar-oriented instruction to more communicative approaches in the classroom to prepare learners to succeed in their academic studies upon entering university (McMurray, 2018; Mizokami, 2014; Stewart, 2009; Tada, 2021).

Despite these government-led initiatives and policies, in addition to 6 plus years of English education, Japan's English proficiency rates appear to show decades of stagnation as was revealed by a recent English Proficiency Index where Japan ranked 80th of 111 non-English speaking countries and regions surveyed (EF Education First, 2022). To further illustrate this point, the bewilderment towards Japanese students' poor English skills has commonly been expressed by teachers of English as the following piece reads.

> ....it is shocking to meet university students in Japan who can barely string the simplest sentence in English together after over 10 years of language study (McNeill, 2022, para. 5).

There is clearly an undeniable gap between the ideals and realities, or policy and practice (Barker, 2018; Glasgow & Paller, 2016; Tada, 2021) and such a gap can arguably be attributed to the absence of opportunities, both inside and outside the classroom, to produce the language for real communication purposes. In response to such criticism, Japan's contextual issues, such as high-stakes university entrance exams, have often been cited as justification for omitting critical output opportunities in the classroom (Harris, 2018; Jones, 2019; Sato, 2009; Tada, 2021).

Yet evidence seems to suggest that, even in tertiary education where learners have left university entrance exams behind them, English instruction is still predominantly conducted in a grammar-focused, lecture-style, providing few output opportunities (Cochrane, 2021; Deacon & Miles, 2019; Fukuda et al. 2016; Waniek & Nae, 2017). Furthermore, an increasing number of Japanese universities are now offering test-focused English courses, such as TOEIC, as featured programs (IIBC, 2019). With most commercially available textbooks for such courses mainly focusing on receptive skills and aimed at producing higher scores, it is likely that learners would fall back into the same pitfall of passive learning.

If the ultimate goal of English education is for the learner to foster communicative English competence, as set forth by MEXT (2013), English education in Japan desperately needs a paradigm shift by introducing something innovative in the classroom since "the current approaches have been shown not to work" (Willis & Wills, 2009, p. 6). Particularly at the tertiary level, where high-stakes entrance exams are no longer a concern for both learners and instructors, we, the teachers, can explore something new in order to activate the learner's previous knowledge and to stimulate their innate desire to be active in their own learning. In other words, it may only be possible when we move beyond narrow-focused instruction to a more holistic approach where teaching so students can produce *and* re-produce language using their own skills in authentic, social contexts.

To help instructors make this transition, this paper presents a "Sandwich Production Method", a production-oriented approach to English education employing Task-based Learning (TBL). In essence, the Sandwich Production Method is designed to address two major problems specific to the Japanese context: lack of a holistic approach to language teaching, especially insufficient output opportunities, and students' passive learning style. The lack of a holistic approach to English teaching here refers to fragmentation in teaching. Whether it is grammar rules, vocabulary, phrases, or idioms, instruction traditionally centers around teaching English knowledge piece by piece and out of context (Shuy, 1981). This is typically conducted through conventional teaching methods,

such as the grammar-translation and Present, Practice, Produce (PPP) methods (Skehan, 1998), where students memorize compartmentalized linguistic items and are tested for accuracy (Tada, 2021). In this way, not only are students rarely presented with opportunities to use the language for meaningful purposes or exposed to the complexities of authentic English language use, but also chances to review and reproduce the language in context are close to none. Furthermore, such traditional instruction is predominantly conducted in a teacher-centered fashion (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009), placing students in a passive learning position, with no control over the content or their learning process. It forces them to focus only on getting the 'correct' answers previously presented by the teacher. Such reliance on the teacher can result in a lack of cognitive engagement, discouraging students from engaging with the language in a meaningful way and depriving them of the opportunity for in-depth understanding of the language.

In contrast, the Sandwich Production Method centers on the idea of "learning by doing and language as usage" (Jackson & Burch, 2017, p. 9). By employing TBL, it takes a learner-centered approach that encourages student interaction through meaningful, goal-oriented real-life tasks (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Willis, 1996). The following section discusses the theoretical foundations of the method and then describes its practical aspects, followed by a sample task sequence.

Theoretical Foundations

The Sandwich Production Method draws primarily on two influential constructivist models proposed by Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1960). The following section describes how the constructivist theories and the TBL principles are integrated into the construction of the Sandwich Production Method.

Constructivism is a learning theory that posits that knowledge is actively constructed by learners through experience and social interaction (Driscoll, 2005; Jonassen, 1999). It claims that learners do not passively absorb knowledge, but rather, construct new understandings by actively engaging with the world around them (Bruner, 1960; Piaget, 1954). This view of learning stands in contrast to the traditional transmission model, which posits that knowledge

is transferred from an expert to a novice (Driscoll, 2005). Constructivism highlights the importance of context in learning, as learners must understand how their experiences relate to the real world (Jonassen, 1999). In this theory, authentic tasks are seen as essential to bridge abstract concepts and real-world situations (Seifert & Sutton, 2009).

Vygotsky, a Soviet developmental psychologist, emphasized the role of social and cultural influences on learning (Vygotsky, 1978). His approach to learning stresses the importance of cultural and societal values in shaping knowledge construction where learners construct their own knowledge, but that this knowledge is shaped by previous experiences and interactions with the social and cultural environment (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). In a classroom setting, it directly refers to group collaboration, where learners can gain the skills to act independently through interaction with more knowledgeable peers or teachers (Wertsch, 1985).

Influenced by Vygotsky, Bruner proposed a constructivist model of learning that values the aspects of reflection and revisiting experiences (Bruner, 1960). He posited that learning is a process, not an end product and that the role of instructors is not to *teach*, but to *guide* learners through experiences and encourage them to participate actively in their learning (Bruner, 1960). Bruner's model encourages the use of instructional scaffolding, where experiences are framed to provide support to build up to the next stage. By revisiting previous learning in a spiral effect, learners can construct new knowledge and acquire skills that are relevant to their lives.

This constructivist learning framework aligns with the TBL principles that value the importance of cognitive engaging tasks as the basis for language learning (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004, as cited in Cochrane, 2021). Both share a focus on learner-centered, active, collaborative, and reflective learning. Learners are encouraged to construct their own understanding of the language through their interactions with others and authentic language examples, and learning occurs not through passive exposure but active engagement in real-life tasks. In other words, rather than looking at language as a subject of study, both approaches see it as a tool for communication, and tasks as the means to foster

communication and interaction between learners.

The Sandwich Production Method in Action

The method primarily consists of 4 stages of cognitive activities on the part of the learner: initial content production, reflection/review, exposure to authentic samples, and content reproduction, with each stage producing its own and overlapping pedagogic effects (Figure 1). While this method features two production components at the beginning and the end, hence the "Sandwich", it places primary emphasis on the *process* of the learning experience. In other words, even though the initial and final stages are essentially fixed, the two elements in the middle can be reversed depending on the learner's proficiency level or the type of task. The practical aspect of each stage is described below, and a brief description of a task example follows.

The initial content production involves pre-production where students construct a small amount of original content, either spoken or written, on a topic related to the upcoming task. This particular stage is aimed at activating and using their existing English knowledge and will become the content to prepare for the next two stages. This also serves as a needs analysis for the instructor. A task may be introduced at this stage where students, in pairs or groups, work to complete the task based on their original content.

During the exposure stage, the instructor exposes the class to relevant authentic samples, such as videos, textual content, websites, or any other content

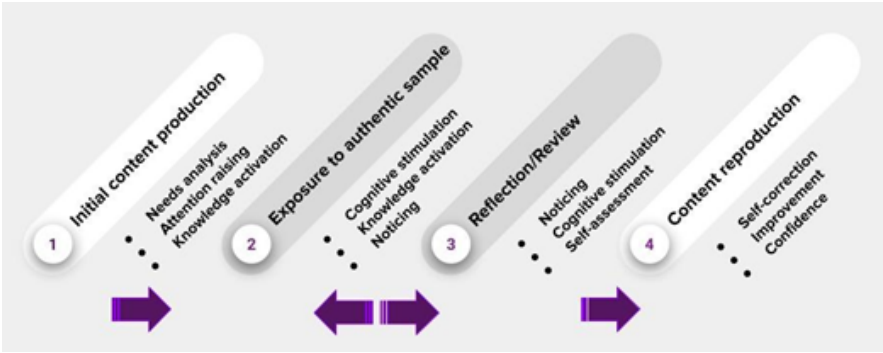


Figure 1. Production Sequence and Effects

materials. At the advanced level, students, on their own, can search for related materials online or from other sources. It is important that students' attention is drawn to the meaning of the message first, then how the message in the samples is structured, prior to any vocabulary or grammar instruction related to the content.

In the reflection/review stage, students review and analyze their own production in relation to the authentic examples. This may be done through a variety of ways, with one example being through peer review in which students give each other feedback for improvements.

The goal of post-production is for students to improve their work from the initial production stage by reviewing feedback and applying what they discovered. Ideally, this stage takes place in class and then as homework. Upon their final submission, the instructor can observe the extent that their output has improved and provide collective feedback to class. The following section presents an example of how the Sandwich Production Method can be implemented in a university English class.

Second-hand Items for Sale: An Implementation Example

Similar to the concept of eBay or Japanese Mercari, this project consists of a mixture of individual and pair/group output activities, both written and spoken. For *initial content production* (as homework), students each choose any item they already possess, take a photo, set a price, and write a description of the item. In class, students make groups of four or five. Each student takes a turn to describe their item to the group, first without, and later with, a photo, while the remaining members listen, take notes, and give feedback, or ask questions to the presenter. Then, each group chooses one item that may be the most popular in the class, capable of being sold easily, and be profitable. Together, the group rewrites the description of the chosen item to improve it and sends it with the photo to the teacher. By the following class, the teacher has compiled the data and makes it available digitally or prepares a handout. To add a sense of reality, a bidding component may be included; for example, students individually view and read

each group's description and choose one item they like to bid on. After revealing the result, students are introduced to authentic sites (e.g., Craigslist, eBay, Gumtree), find similar items, and then analyze how they are written [*exposure* + *reflection/review*]. Each group is to revise and submit their own or other group's description as a post-project assignment [*reproduction*]. Peer review can also be effective in order to foster objectivity.

The Role of the Instructor

While this method is primarily learner-centered, the instructor plays a vital role in guiding students in the right direction, often by means of scaffolding. Scaffolding can be defined as "those supportive behaviors, adopted by the more expert partner in collaboration with the L2 learner, that might facilitate the learner's progress to a higher level of language development" (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000, p. 53). In the Japanese EFL classroom, it can start with a few small points, such as raising awareness of the L1 and L2 differences whenever appropriate. Not only does this become a useful point of reference for the instructor, but it is extremely beneficial for students to notice how English is organized and make sense of it.

Exploring what students do not know, or accurately understanding students' prior English skills and knowledge, becomes crucial for successful implementation of this method, because an instructor's assumptions could cause unwanted frustration or tension between the teacher and students. Previous research has discussed in depth this gap between Japanese students' actual English proficiency and teachers' assumptions (Cochrane, 2022). In the case of writing assignments such as the one described above, it is safe to assume that most students, if not all, struggle with the basic structure of organizing logical thoughts in English. The basic concept of English discourse structure should therefore be introduced by any means, or at any stage. Ideally, this can be reinforced between the review and post-production stages where students have somewhat noticed how English is organized through analyses of authentic examples. Class observations suggest that after introducing the common English organizational patterns in a systematic way, students tend to be more attentive not only when constructing their own writing but also when giving constructive

feedback to their peers.

Benefits and Challenges of the Method

Observations from early iterations of the method found some noteworthy changes in learner behaviors. One of the most notable may be an increase in cognitive engagement both inside and outside the classroom. For instance, students appeared to take assignments more seriously than before, including those who were often sporadic in homework submission. Furthermore, it was discovered that a few groups in almost every class observed had, on their own initiative, arranged to work outside the classroom to complete their tasks.

In class, students seemed more serious in their group discussions, while at the same time enjoying the collaboration. There was also an increase in the number of students who asked their own questions about English from what they discovered, and consequently, noticing seemed to occur during the review and post-production stages. To illustrate, students seemed to be picking up something "not right" in their own work and searching for "what sounds right" through whatever means they had. Upon reaching this stage, addressing any grammar or structure became easier, perhaps because they were more inclined to listen as they had already produced something relevant. All these actions by the students may indicate that students started taking ownership for their learning, and more importantly, perceiving the language as a tool, not just a study object.

Another benefit of this 180-degree shift in English teaching is that it places the responsibility of learning on the student, rather than the teacher. By starting with their own content, students inevitably focus on what is important and relevant to them, which helps them learn and increase their ability for noticing. The power of student creativity is often overlooked in traditional teaching methods, but research suggests that students would find creative tasks not only empowering but satisfying, even if they may at first perceive them to be difficult (Gromik, 2006; Cochrane, 2012; Cochrane, 2022). As students become more familiar with this new approach, they become more comfortable, confident, and independent in their ability to learn (Cochrane, 2021).

Challenges

As with any qualitative pedagogic instruction, this approach comes with challenges for the instructor. Setting up an initial series of tasks, for example, may be daunting at first as it takes time and patience. Another challenge may be stepping back from the traditional teaching style and allowing students to take the lead in asking for assistance. Lastly, this type of approach often generates concerns in terms of assessment of student work (Giraldo, 2020; Harris, 2019). Essentially, assessment should be about language use, whether it is students' task performance, or final production, which "need(s) to be assessed on a criterion of task fulfilment rather than for its linguistic accuracy" (Wigglesworth, 2008, p. 118). From the perspective of learner-centered pedagogy, the teacher's formal grading could incorporate peer review, which has been shown to be not only reliable but also beneficial in increasing learners' engagement (Okuda & Otsu, 2010).

Overall, this shift towards learner-centered instruction can be a powerful tool for enhancing learning outcomes, provided that there exists a willingness to adapt and embrace new methods on the part of the teacher. While there may still be some hesitation to implement the Sandwich Production Method, there are few reasons for not trying it for university English classes where "there is greater freedom of choice and action" (Willis & Willis, 2009, p. 6) in what the instructor can do. Yet, for the sake of learners, it is hoped that it will reach wider teaching contexts in Japan.

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