Chapter 4
Task-Based Language Teaching: Early Days, Now and into the Future

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Abstract Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is now the approach mandated by a number of educational authorities in Asia. In this chapter, I will show how task-based language teaching (TBLT) grew out of communicative language teaching, drawing on both second-language acquisition research and theories of education. I will trace its development from its early days, pointing to the multiple influences that have helped to shape its evolution. I will address key issues such as how to define 'task', how tasks have been classified, how they can be sequenced into a syllabus, and how a complete lesson can be built around a task. I will also briefly consider the use of tasks in computer-mediated language teaching and in assessment. I will emphasize that TBLT is multifarious and conclude with a set of questions that can guide the ongoing development of TBLT.

Keywords Task-based language teaching · Early development · Later developments · Addressing problems

Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is now firmly established as an approach that is supported by both second-language acquisition research and by principles of sound education (Long, 2015). It provides a basis for designing and implementing specific-purpose language programmes for adults and is also the recommended approach for teaching foreign languages to young learners in the state education systems of different parts of the world. It has been subject to extensive research investigating the design of tasks and their implementation (see Ellis et al., 2019) and of studies evaluating the effectiveness of complete task-based language programmes. There is now ample evidence that it is effective in developing learners' ability to communicate

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in a second language (L2) and that, with appropriate training teachers are able to implement it successfully. Nevertheless, doubts regarding its theoretical and practical viability have been expressed, especially in foreign language contexts where learners have no or little opportunity to use the L2 outside the classroom (Littlewood, 2014; Swan, 2005) while evaluation studies have pointed to problems in implementing TBLT, especially in state education systems.

I have two purposes in writing this article. The first is to examine briefly how TBLT has emerged as the preferred approach for teaching foreign languages by taking a historical perspective. The second is to identify key issues that remain and suggest ways in which they can be addressed. It has become clear to me that there is a clear difference between specific-purpose and general-purpose TBLT as the design of such programmes involves very different principles and procedures. My focus will be on general TBLT at the primary and secondary levels of state education systems. A quite different article is needed to address specific-purpose TBLT for adult learners.

A Brief History of Task-Based Language Teaching

Prior to the advent of communicative language teaching (CLT) in the 1980s, the dominant approach to teaching foreign languages was the structural one, where a language is broken down into phonological, lexical and grammatical bits that are presented and practised sequentially one at a time. While, it would be a mistake to say that task-like activities had no place in this approach, the focus was clearly on accurate production and the underlying assumption was that communicate ability would be achieved only when learners could synthesize the bits into wholes. CLT arose out of the belief that such synthesis often failed to occur and that the ability to communicate needed addressing more in other ways. Two quite different ways of achieving this were proposed—both claiming to be 'communicative'.

The first was the notional/functional approach (Wilkins, 1976) where functions such as requesting and apologizing and notions such as possibility and location replaced linguistic units in a syllabus. Such an approach claimed to be 'analytic' rather than 'synthetic' and, on the surface, appeared a radical alternative to the structural syllabus. However, an inspection of the teaching materials based on the notional/ functional approach (e.g. Abbs & Freebairn, 1982) reveals that the 'new' approach was in fact quite similar to the 'old'. It still involved presenting and practising the language required to realize the notions and functions. Thus, while a notional/ functional syllabus was quite distinct from a structural one, the methodology used to implement it remained essentially the same—drills and situational exercises predominated. The problem of synthesizing the bits (in this case the linguistic exponents of the notions and functions) into communicative routines remained unsolved.

The second approach was to adapt the structural approach by adding a 'fluency' component. The adaptation took two forms. One was to provide a separate 'fluency' module to a structural curriculum. That is, in addition to the standard structural approach aimed at 'accuracy', there were separate fluency activities involving tasks

(i.e. activities that required learners to communicate as best they could using whatever linguistic resources they possessed). Books such as Klippel's (1985) *Keep Talking: Communicative Activities for Language Teaching* and Porter Ladousse's (1983) *Speaking Personally: Quizzes and Questionnaire for Fluency Practice* provided teachers with an array of ideas and activities for developing learners' communicative ability. Textbooks such as Aston's (1983) *Interact* contained activities aimed at increasing 'fluency' rather than 'knowledge'. Brumfit (1984) in his *Communicative Methodology in Language Teaching* articulated the rationale for including a fluency module alongside an accuracy module in a language curriculum. The place of tasks in a language curriculum was firmly established.

There was, however, a reluctance to abandon the structural syllabus so the second way of incorporating 'fluency' was as an add-on to the more traditional, drill-like activities in an accuracy-based curriculum. This gave rise to the presentation-practice-production (PPP) model, with the final P consisting of a task intended to provide opportunity for learners to communicate freely using the target feature that had been presented and practised in the previous two Ps. Anderson (2016) traces the emergence of PPP to the mid-1970s, when situational language teaching began to evolve into a more communicative approach. In *Teaching Oral English*, Byrne (1976) made the case for freer use of language on the grounds it as necessary to ensure that learners could 'use the language for themselves' (p. 80). PPP gained in popularity in the 1980s—see, for example, Harmer's (1983) *The Practice of language Teaching*. Howatt (1984) characterized it as a 'weak version' of the communicative approach. PPP has proved highly durable in ELT course books and in short initial teacher training courses such as the Cambridge CELTA and Trinity CertTESOL. Anderson suggests that this was because of its compatibility with a grammatical syllabus.

An important variant of PPP appeared in the 1980s. In the second edition of his book, Byrne (1986) suggested that the order of the three stages could be flexible, with the free production stage preceding the presentation and practice stages. Byrne drew on Johnson's (1982) 'deep-end strategy', where 'the student is placed in a situation where he (sic) may need to use language not yet taught' and thereby activate 'the ability to search for circumlocutions when the appropriate language item is not known' (p. 193). This necessitated communicative tasks where the learner's use of language was judged not in terms of whether it was grammatically correct but in terms of whether the communicative outcome of the task was achieved. Harmer (1997) in *How to Teach English* proposed Engage-Study-Activate (ESA) as an alternative to PPP, where 'engage' involves task-like activities based on stories, music and discussions designed to capture the students' interest, 'study' is a combination of the present and practice stages of PPP, and 'activate' involved free production. In all of these proposals, however, the focus of a lesson remained on a pre-selected target feature with the aim of enabling the learner to use this feature accurately and freely in communication. The tasks needed for this were of the 'focused' kind (Ellis, 2003)—that is, they were designed to elicit the natural use of the target feature. This is what second-language acquisition researchers objected to and that led to proposals for TBLT.

Second-Language Acquisition Research

The second-language acquisition research that started in the 1960s and 1970s fed into the emergence of TBLT. Cross-sectional studies of learners acquiring an L2 naturalistically (e.g. Dulay & Burt, 1973) provided evidence that there was an acquisition order for a common set of English grammatical morphemes that was common to all learners irrespective of their first languages (L1) or their age. A very similar order was found in classroom learners, suggesting that instruction did not have a major impact on the developmental route learners followed. Longitudinal studies (e.g. Cancino et al., 1978) showed that learners passed through a series of stages involving 'transitional constructions' on route to acquiring the target form. Progress was gradual and often very slow and at any one stage of development considerable variability was evident in those constructions available to the learner at that point in his/her development. Furthermore, it was clear that the initial stages of acquisition were lexical in nature. Learners relied on stringing words together that they had acquired and on formulaic chunks (e.g. *I don't know; What's this?*) which might seem to be grammatical but are learned as wholes (Wong-Fillmore, 1979). As they set about acquiring grammatical features, they do not do so in a linear fashion but rather work on several structures concurrently. This research led to the claim that there was a 'natural route' for mastering the grammar of a language and that there is a 'built-in syllabus' for learning it (Corder, 1967), which was independent of the external teaching syllabus.

Drawing on this research, Krashen (1985) argued that true proficiency in an L2 depends on 'acquisition', defined as 'the subconscious process identical in all important ways to the process children utilize in acquiring their first language', and not on 'learning', defined as 'the conscious process that results in 'knowing about' language' (p. 1). *The Natural Approach* (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) constituted an attempt to apply Krashen's ideas about how languages were 'acquired' to pedagogic practice. It emphasized task-like activities that focus learners' primary attention on meaning and cater to 'acquisition'. TBLT is based on the same principle.

Early TBLT Proposals

'Tasks' figured in both early CLT and The Natural Approach but in neither were they conceived of as the units around which a complete language course could be built. It was not until the mid to late 1980s that the first proposals for a task-based approach appeared. These early proposals (Breen, 1989; Candlin, 1987; Long, 1985) were largely programmatic in nature. They focused on the rationale for a task-based syllabus and outlined how to design and evaluate a task-based curriculum. Prabhu (1987) provided the first complete account of a task-based course [1], while Nunan (1989) gave practical advice about how to design tasks.

Rationale for TBLT

From the start, therefore, there were multiple inputs into the rationale for TBLT. Drawing on research in SLA, Long (1985) argued that 'there is no reason to assume that presenting the target language as a series of discrete linguistic or sociolinguistic teaching points is the best, or even *a* way to get learners to synthesize the parts into a coherent whole' (p. 79). He saw an approach based on tasks as providing an 'integrated solution to both syllabus and methodological issues' (p. 89). Candlin (1987) also critiqued traditional approaches but from an educational standpoint. He argued that an approach based on tasks would enable learners 'to become more aware of their own personalities and social roles' (p. 17), foster self-realization and self-fulfilment, and enhance their self-confidence. Along with Breen (1989), he emphasized the importance of teachers and students jointly negotiating the content of a course and argued that tasks provided the best means for achieving this. Prabhu's (1987) starting point was dissatisfaction with the Structural–Oral–Situational Method, which draws on a structural syllabus and was dominant in his teaching context in India at that time. He argued that 'the development of competence in a second language requires not systematization of language input or maximation of planned practice, but rather the creation of conditions in which learners engage in an effort to cope with communication' (p. 1) and that this could be best achieved by having students perform tasks. Drawing on all these sources, Nunan (1989) offered teachers a practical introduction to the design and use of tasks. He claimed that basing teaching on tasks avoided the traditional distinction between syllabus and methodology. He suggested that a structural syllabus was still needed but as a checklist that teachers could consult rather than as a directive about what they should teach.

Defining 'Task'

Central to the development of TBLT is a clear understanding of what a 'task' is. The early proposals for task-based teaching recognized this and offered definitions of a 'task', but these varied in a number of ways. Breen's (1989) definition was the most encompassing. A task is 'a structured plan for the provision of opportunities for the refinement of knowledge and capabilities entailed in a new language and its use during communication'—in effect any type of instructional activity. Other definitions emphasized that a task requires learners to focus on meaning rather than form (Nunan, 1989), that is should constitute a communicative activity in its own right and that the language for performing a task is negotiated as the task is performed. Long (1985) proposed that a task should bear some resemblance to a task that people perform in real life. He defined tasks as 'the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between' (p. 89). According to this definition, many of the 'tasks' described teacher resource books (e.g. Klippel, 1985) were not in fact tasks

Table 4.1 A typology of tasks types (Prabhu, 1987; 46–7)

Type of task	Definition
Information gap	This type involves 'a transfer of given information from one person to another—or from one form to another, or from one place to another'
Reasoning gap	This type involves 'deriving some new information from given information through the processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns'
Opinion gap	This type involves 'identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation'

as they were not based on target tasks. Clearly, at this stage in the development of TBLT, there was no consensus as to what a task consisted of.

Classifying Tasks

As well as attempts at defining tasks, commentators proposed ways of classifying them. Candlin, however, felt that it is not possible to 'offer anything other than implicit suggestions that tasks might be catalogued under several distinct types' (p. 14) and that as a result 'a typology is bound to be fuzzy-edged and at most a managerial convenience' (p. 15). Nunan presented several task typologies drawn from different sources, the most useful of which was Prabhu's (see Table 4.1), which is based on how the information in a task is handled by the participants.

Grading and Sequencing Tasks

The construction of a task-based syllabus requires clear criteria for determining the difficulty of tasks. At this stage in the development of TBLT, however, such criteria were programmatic. Lists of factors likely to influence task difficulty appeared—for example, the linguistic complexity of the input in a task, the extent to which the task requires reference to present or past/future events, the intellectual challenge posed, and the learners' familiarity with the topic of the task. But there were no suggestions for how one factor should be balanced against others with the result that, as Prabhu found, the grading and sequencing tasks in the Communicational Teaching Project was a matter of intuition than precise measurement.

Subsequent Developments

The foundation for TBLT was laid, but several issues remained to be settled and TBLT was not yet established as a coherent approach to teaching a language. It was not until the 2nd edition of Richards and Rogers' *Approaches and Methods in Language* in 2001 that TBLT got a mention and, then, not as a distinct approach but as a variant of communicative language teaching. The sections that follow outline the nature of the developments that took place.

Broadening the Rationale for TBLT

Early account of TBLT paid little attention to broader educational principles, framing the rationale solely in terms of second-language acquisition research. Subsequently, however, advocates of the approach looked for support from general theories of education. Samuda and Bygate (2008) pointed to Dewey (1938), who rejected instructional approaches that focused on the mastery of ready-made products and emphasized the importance of learning that connects with experience of the real world. TBLT reflects the emphasis that Bruner (1960) placed on positioning the learner as a 'practitioner' rather than as a 'student'. Long (2015) devotes a whole chapter to the educational underpinnings of TBLT, claiming that TBLT is compatible with the requirements of a sound education—*education integrale*, freedom, emancipation, learner-centredness, egalitarian teacher–student relationships, participatory democracy and cooperation. In other words, TBLT was not only good for language learning but for the education of the whole person.

Defining 'Task'

Defining a task has continued to problematic, and definitions have proliferated over the years. Bygate et al. (2001) offered an all-purpose definition:

> A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.

and then went on to suggest how it can be modified to suit the different purposes that tasks are used for. Van den Branden (2006b) reviewed 17 different definitions which they classified in terms of whether they referred to language learning goals or to educational activity. Such proliferation of definitions is not helpful, however. The problem arises because of the failure to distinguish task-as-workplan (i.e. what appears in a syllabus or in a set of teaching materials) and task-as-process (i.e. what emerges when the task is performed). Ellis (2003, 2009) argued that a task cannot be defined in terms of process as this is unpredictable and therefore can only be defined

as a workplan. He also argued that any definition should distinguish a 'task' from an 'exercise' and to this end proposed a definition based on four key criteria:

1. The primary focus is on meaning.
2. There is some kind of gap.
3. Learners have to rely mainly on their own linguistic (and non-linguistic) resources (i.e. they are not given the language they need to perform the task).
4. There is a clearly defined communicative outcome.

He noted, however, that some workplans satisfy some but not all four criteria. In other words, workplans can vary in the extent to they are true tasks of just task-like.

Task Types

Willis (1996) distinguished six types of tasks based on the cognitive operations they involve—listing, ordering and sequencing, comparing, problem-solving, sharing personal experiences and creative. Task-based researchers, however, have sought to distinguish task types in terms of the communicative and cognitive processes involved in performing them as these affect the way language is used. This has given rise to a widely accepted set of task types:

- Information-gap versus opinion-gap tasks
- One way versus two way tasks
- Convergent versus divergent tasks
- Closed versus open tasks.

Tasks differ in several other ways. They can be input-based (i.e. involve listening or reading) or output-based (i.e. involve speaking or writing). They can be 'real-world' (i.e. based on tasks that occur in everyday life such as booking a plane ticket) or 'pedagogic' (i.e. involve artificial activities such as Spot the Difference where learners have to find the differences between two pictures). They can be monologic or dialogic. They can involve different rhetorical modes (e.g. instructions, description, narrative, argument). There is no all-encompassing typology of tasks. This is not surprising given that tasks reflect the range of uses to which language can be put.

One distinction requires special attention, not least because there is controversy surrounding which type is compatible with TBLT. Tasks can also be unfocused or focused (Ellis, 2003). An unfocused task is intended to elicit general samples of language. A focused task must still satisfy the general criteria for a task but aims at orientating learners to the use of a particular linguistic feature—usually a grammatical structure. Advocates of TBLT differ in whether they think tasks should be entirely unfocused or a mixture of unfocused and focused. I will come back to this issue later in this chapter.

Task Selection

Task selection is also an aspect of TBLT that is controversial. Long (1985, 2015) argues that selection should be based on a needs analysis to identify the target (i.e. real-world) tasks that a specific group of learners need to be able to perform to function effectively in the social domains important to them. The obvious advantage of such an approach is that it ensures the relevance of a task-based course for learners with identifiable specific needs. It is less clear, however, how such an approach to task selection suits the needs of general-purpose learners such as those found in the state education systems of foreign language learners. Cameron (2001), for example argued that for young foreign language learners a needs-based syllabus is not feasible. Arguably, task selection for such learners should be based on identifying topics that are of interest to the learners and that involve familiar content. A good example of this approach can be found in Estaire and Zanon (1994), who classified topic areas in in terms of how close or remote they are to the lives of the learners—the students themselves, their homes, their school, the world around them and fantasy and imagination. Ideally, though, learners need to be consulted to identify suitable topics for tasks.

Task Complexity

The general principle for constructing any syllabus is that there should be a progression from simple (easy) activities to more complex (difficult) activities. Applying this principle to TBLT requires being able to identify what makes a task simple or complex. Early TBLT proposals recognized this need and proposed a set of criteria for evaluating the complexity of a task. Subsequent researchers have built on this by developing a theoretical framework of task complexity and by conducting studies to investigate whether manipulating specific task variables impacts in ways predicted by the theory.

Robinson's (2003) Cognition Hypothesis distinguishes resource-directing and resource-dispersing task variables that he claimed influence the difficulty of specific tasks. Resource-directing variables, such as whether there is contextual support, whether the task involves just a few or many elements, and whether reasoning is required, determine the cognitive complexity of a task and result in language use that is more accurate and complex. Resource-dispersing variables, such as whether learners have the opportunity to plan before they perform a task and whether they have prior knowledge of the topic of the task, reduce the processing burden involved in performing a task and encourage fluency. The difficulty of a specific task is determined by the variables it encompasses. Research, however, has not unequivocally supported the claims of Robinson's theory. Jackson and Suethanpronkul (2013) reviewed nine studies. They found that resource-directing variables did lead to more accurate language use but not to more complex.

A problem with Robinson's theory is that, unlike Skehan's (1996) framework for the implementation of task-based language teaching, it does not clearly distinguish variables inherent in the design of a task workplan (e.g. contextual support) from variables relating to the implementation of a task (e.g. planning). This failure may have arisen because of the widely accepted view in the early proposals for TBLT that 'task' is a unit that integrates *what* learners will learn (i.e. syllabus) and *how* they learn (i.e. methodology). In fact, the 'what' and the 'how' are as distinct in TBLT as in any other approach; any task can be implemented in a variety of ways. Task complexity is best considered in terms of the design features of workplans. Later in this chapter, I will address what this means for grading and sequencing tasks in task-based syllabuses.

Methodological Issues

The early proposals had little to say about how a task should be implemented and, Prabhu excepted, even less about how to plan a task-based lesson. Subsequently, however, greater attention has been paid to lesson planning and methodological issues in TBLT.

In Prabhu's Communicational Language Project, a task-based lesson consisted of a pre-task, which served as a preparation for a main task of the same kind. The pre-task was performed in a whole-class context while the main task was completed by the students working individually. Willis (1996) proposed a very different framework for a task-based lesson, one that prioritized learner–learner interaction. In her task-based learning framework, there was a pre-task stage to introduce the task and possibly pre-teach useful vocabulary, a task cycle stage consisting of the performance of the task, planning a report, and then presenting the report to the class, and finally a language focus stage. Later, in Ellis (2003), simplified Willis' framework into three stages—a pre-task stage, a main-task stage and a post-task stage with various options available in each stage. However, not every lesson has to involve all three stages; the only stage that is essential is the main-task stage.

A methodological issue of considerable importance—and one where there is again controversy—concerns how teachers handle the main-task phase. Willis (1996) advised teachers to 'stand back and let the learners get on with the task on their own' (p. 54) and argued they should resist the temptation to provide language support or correct learners' production while learners perform a task. She proposed that a concern for accuracy be delayed until after the task had been completed (i.e. to the planning and report stages of the task cycle). Long (1991, 2015), however, has consistently argued that there was a need to draw learners' attention to form *during* the performance of a task. He coined the term 'focus on form' to refer to a teaching strategy that 'overtly draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication' (p. 45–46). One of the main ways of achieving this is through corrective feedback, but teachers and students also sometimes pre-empt a linguistic gap (see Ellis et al.,

2002) in the attempt to prevent a problem occurring. The recognition that task-based teaching does not necessitate an exclusive focus on meaning but also allows for (indeed requires in the opinion Long and other commentators) attention to form during the performance of a task constitutes one of the major developments in TBLT. It should also be noted that 'form' in this sense does not apply exclusively to grammar but also the phonological, lexical and pragmalinguistic forms.

According to Willis (1996), the point of the pre-task stage of a lesson is 'is not to teach large amounts of new language and certainly not to teach one particular grammatical structure' (p. 43) although she sees merit in helping learners with the vocabulary needed to perform the task. Other opportunities for introducing a focus on form in the pre-task phase are available. For example, giving learners the opportunity to plan before they perform a task will help them to both conceptualize what they want to communicate and to formulate the language they need to express it. There are also opportunities to focus on linguistic accuracy in the planning and reporting stages of the task cycle when the teacher can act as an adviser helping the learners to shape their meanings and to improve their choice of wordings, both grammatical and lexical.

However, it is the post-task stage—what Willis calls the language analysis stage—that offers the clearest opportunities for form-focused work including that of a more traditional kind. Willis and Willis (2007) suggested that when the task cycle stage is complete, the teacher is free to isolate specific linguistic forms for study, drawing on forms that learners used inaccurately when they performed the task or identifying language they did not use, but which would have made performing the task easier. In other words, the selection of the linguistic forms for attention in the final stage of the lesson or for later on is not pre-determined but based on the linguistic features that learners experienced actual difficulty with when they performed a task.

Other Developments

My focus so far has been on how TBLT evolved out of communicative language teaching into a distinct approach with its own theoretical basis, design principles and methodological procedures. To complete this account of its development, I will now briefly address three further aspects—the role of tasks in content-based language teaching, task-based assessment and technology-mediated TBLT.

Tasks in Content-Based and Content Integrated Language Learning

Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and Content Integrated Language Learning (CLIL) share with TBLT the assumption that a language is best learned when learners are

primarily focused on using language (Lyster, 2007). In CBI and CLIL, learners learn language through the process of mastering the content of (typically) academic subjects (e.g. history, science, mathematics). This can involve subject-relevant tasks where the task content is derived from the syllabus for an academic subject. However, CBI/CLIL do not rely exclusively on tasks; direct teaching of the language relevant for a particular subject area can also occur. Ortega (2015) suggests that TBLT focuses more on adult, college-level learners and CLIL on young, school-level learners, but this has more to do with contexts in which the two approaches have been developed than with any fundamental difference. There is in fact growing recognition that TBLT is highly relevant for foreign language contexts and for young children.

Technologically Mediated TBLT

Developments in CALL have mirrored those in language pedagogy in general. There was a structural/ behaviourist phase that gave way to a communicative phase and finally to a more integrative stage with the 'centrality of task-based authentic learning moving increasingly into the foreground' (Thomas & Reinders, 2010; 6). Technology-mediated TBLT has a number of advantages. It affords multimodal opportunities (aural, written and visual) for presenting complex workplans and for performing them both synchronously and asynchronously. For example, Appel and Gilabert (2002) described a task where learners had to plan a route and budget for a one-night trip and which involved email exchanges, the use of web pages and synchronous communication. Another advantage of technology is that it allows for presenting the input for a task sequentially in steps, which is not easy to achieve in the face-to-face classroom. Technology also affords the opportunity to interlock tasks into broader projects (Ortega, 2009), which again is arguably easier to organize with the assistance of technology. The increasing interest in technology-mediated TBLT is reflected in the growing literature on the subject (e.g. Gonzalez-Lloret & Ortega, 2015; Thomas & Reinders, 2015), the appearance of online TBLT courses (e.g. Duran & Ramaut, 2006), and research investigating technologically mediated tasks (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014).

Task-Based Assessment

The emergence of TBLT has inevitably led to proposals for task-based assessment. In fact, though, as Bachman (2002) pointed out, the use of tasks for assessment purposes figured in language testing long before TBLT appeared on the scene. What was new was not the use of tasks to assess general language proficiency but for assessing whether learners were able to perform specific target tasks. When assessing general proficiency, the assessor makes a judgement of the learner's performance of a task based on a rating scale that specifies the different abilities being assessed and

the level achieved. Popular tests such as TOEFL and IELTS assess proficiency in this way. In task-based language assessment, however, assessment is based on task accomplishment:

> Task-based assessment does not simply utilize the real-world task as a means for eliciting particular components of the language system, which are then measured or evaluated; instead the construct of interest is performance of the task itself (Long & Norris, 2000: 600).

Long and Norris argued that assessment tasks, like teaching tasks, should be derived from target tasks. However, assessing in terms of task accomplishment does not necessitate the use of real-life tasks. Pedagogic tasks, especially if they are closed tasks (e.g. a Spot the Difference task that requires learners to identify a specific number of differences), can also be assessed by examining how successful learners are in achieving the outcome. However, assessment is not limited to examining the task outcome; there is also the possibility of assessing how learners perform a task. Van Gorp and Deygers (2014) based their assessment of a reading task designed for primary school students on a set of questions: (1) was the students' reading of the task-based material goal oriented, (2) could they find the information they were looking for, (3) was the teacher able to identify and address any problems the students experienced and (4) did the students demonstrate self-reliance, positive attitudes and reflective ability. Obtaining information about the performance of a task is especially important if the purpose of the assessment is formative rather than summative. Finally, there is also a strong case for student self-assessing how they performed a task. Butler (2017) showed that young children's self-assessment of their performance of a task correlated well with a more objective assessment. Tasks are not only a way of assessing learners' language proficiency or functional language ability but also serve as a source of information—for both teachers and learners—about whether the tasks were performed effectively and for reflecting on them.

Where We Have Got to?

I have traced the development of TBLT from its origins in the 1980s. It emerged as a strong form of communicative language teaching, supported by research in SLA. It offered a radically different alternative to mainstream language teaching by taking 'task' rather than 'language' as the starting point for the design of a course and by proposing that L2 learning can only be facilitated, not directed. Early proposals addressed a number of key issues—the definition of a task, the different types of tasks and the factors that determine task complexity. Subsequent developments from the 1990s onwards built on this foundation but also addressed how to construct complete lessons around tasks by distinguishing pre-task, main-task and post-task stages. There was also a stronger focus on the implementation of tasks with 'focus on form' seen as a key component of TBLT. Concurrent with these developments was a growing interest in technologically mediated TBLT and task-based assessment.

TBLT is now well established. Starting in 2005, there has been a biennial conference devoted to TBLT and recently a specialist journal called *Tasks* has appeared. A number of countries have officially mandated the use of TBLT. There have also been countless small-scale implementations of TBLT in contexts where teachers are free to choose their own approach (see, e.g., Leaver & Willis, 2004; Edwards & Willis, 2005). TBLT has progressed well beyond theory into actual practice.

It would be wrong to assume, however, that we have now reached a point where TBLT is a well-defined approach. Some advocates (Long and Norris, in particular) view TBLT as an approach that involves needs analysis to identify the real-life tasks that should figure in a teaching syllabus and in assessment. Such an approach is obviously required for specific-purpose courses. It is, however, not suited to school-level learners in foreign language learning contexts as such learners will usually not have any need to use the target language outside the classroom. An approach based on pedagogic tasks involving interesting and familiar topics is better suited to such contexts. There are also different views about TBLT methodology, with some advocates (Willis, for example) arguing against any attempt to focus learners' attention on form while a task is being performed and others (Long and Ellis) viewing a focus on form as essential component of task performance but with differences in how best to achieve this. TBLT is certainly not a 'method'. It is not monolithic but rather an approach with different versions all of which share the fundamental conviction that language learning is more successful when learners have to struggle to communicate in order to achieve the task outcomes.

There is a need to establish the parameters that define the boundaries of variation in TBLT. For example, is there a role for explicit language instruction in TBLT and if so what is it? There is also a need to address a number of outstanding issues relating to both the design and methodology of task-based courses. For example, how can TBLT work for complete beginners? In the next section of this chapter, I consider where TBLT needs to go by addressing these and other issues.

Where Are We Going?

Because TBLT constitutes a radically different approach to mainstream language teaching, it constitutes an innovation for many teachers. Evaluation studies (e.g. Beretta, 1990; Carless, 2004; Hu, 2013) point to problems arising when teachers attempt to introduce it:

- Teachers may not have a clear misunderstanding about what a 'task' is.
- Teachers are often uncertain how to use TBLT with beginner-level students.
- In some cases, teachers with limited target language proficiency experience difficulty in implementing TBLT.
- Students overuse their L1 when performing tasks.
- Teachers have difficulty adjusting tasks to the students' level of proficiency.
- TBLT is difficult to implement in large classes.

- There is a lack of task-based teaching resources and limited time for teachers to develop their own task-based resources.
- Teachers are uncertain about how to handle grammar in TBLT.
- In many instructional contexts, teachers need to prepare students for formal examinations.
- Teachers may lack of training in TBLT.

There have also been a number of published critiques of TBLT. Swan (2005), for example, disputes the theoretical basis of TBLT and argues that it is only suited to second-language contexts such as the USA. Clearly, if TBLT is to thrive, it is necessary to examine the issues raised by the evaluation studies and critics such as Swan. Below I discuss a number of these issues and suggest ways of addressing them.

Misunderstanding of the Nature of a Task

A fundamental requirement for the successful introduction of TBLT is that teachers have a clear understanding of what a task is. Studies have shown this is often lacking. Carless (2004), for example, found the elementary school teachers in Hong Kong had very vague notions of a task and were unable to provide a clear definition. Erlam (2016) found that the tasks she asked teachers to design in an in-service programme did not fully match up to the definition of a 'task' that she had given them. In particular, the teachers tended to design tasks that involved the prior presentation of language reflecting their pre-existing ideas of what an instructional activity should do. To address this problem, teachers need a clear definition of a task—such as the one suggested earlier in this chapter—and the opportunity to evaluate a range of different instructional activities in terms of whether they are 'tasks' or 'exercises'. Another way would be for teachers to try to modify exercises to convert them into tasks.

Teachers' Lack of Certainty About TBLT for Beginner-Level Learners

This problem arises because of a common misunderstanding about TBLT, namely that it involves only speaking tasks. Beginner-level learners—with no or little knowledge of the L2—cannot be expected to perform speaking tasks. However, they can undertake input-based tasks that involve listening to input from the teacher and demonstrating their understanding by performing an action. Such tasks do not require production, but they do not prohibit it and learners are free to try to produce the language they are exposed to if they want to. Ellis (2020) provides detailed guidance

about how to design and implement input-based tasks for beginner-level learners. Slattery and Willis (2001) also provide examples of tasks for beginners.

Input-based tasks are very compatible with what we know about the early stages of L2 acquisition. Learning begins with vocabulary and short phrases—not with grammar, which comes later. It is initially receptive and occurs incidentally when learners hear and understand what is said to them. It requires input that is comprehensible and multiple exposures to the same words and phrases. Shintani's (2016) study was based on this understanding of early L2 acquisition. She used some simple input-based tasks to teacher Japanese children who were complete beginners. In one task, the children had to listen to directions from the teachers (e.g. *Find the squirrel and take it to the zoo*), select the correct picture card from an array of cards to show they had understood, and deposit the card in a pocket of the outline of a zoo pinned to the wall. She repeated the task nine times. Initially, the children could only guess but eventually they were able to understand the teachers' directions. Interestingly, each repetition of the task resulted in quite different activity. Initially, the children resorted to their L1 to seek clarification of what they had to do but gradually they started trying to use English.

Teachers' Limited L2 Oral Proficiency

Teachers' lack of or lack of confidence in their L2 oral proficiency can result in them resisting the introduction of TBLT and relying on traditional approaches. This is, however, a not a problem specific to TBLT but for any approach aimed at developing learners' communicative competence. Input-based tasks can help with this problem too if the input needed for the performance of a task is scripted so that teachers are given the language they need. Input-based tasks involving reading can also help teachers with limited L2 proficiency as they can check in advance that they understand the language.

When it comes to output-based tasks, teachers need to understand that errors are inevitable and they do not need to worry about them. Students will benefit from seeing their teacher engage in the same struggle to communicate as they themselves are experiencing. In fact, teachers can improve their own ability to communicate by performing tasks with their students! Finally, teachers should understand that TBLT does not completely prohibit their use of the L1 and that there are times when it will be appropriate to use it—for example, in helping students to understand a key word needed to perform a task.

Students' Overuse of the L1

TBLT does not ban students' using the L1. Beginner-level learners will need to use it to ensure they understand what is required of them when they perform a task. Even

more advanced learners can make effective use of the L1 in dealing with linguistic problems that arise. Clearly, though, TBLT will not achieve its goals if students avoid using the L2 on a major scale. For TBLT to work, students need to be prepared take risks in using the L2 and to develop skill in using circumlocution strategies when they lack the linguistic resources needed to express their meaning. The problem of overuse arises when students are asked to perform a task that is too difficult for them. For example, as noted above, beginner-level learners cannot be expected to perform production tasks such as Spot the Difference if they lack the basic vocabulary needed to describe their picture. Again, a solution is to start with input-based tasks, where the linguistic input can be carefully controlled and where there are contextual aids such as pictures or actions to help understanding. Asking learners to speak before they are ready will inevitably lead to inappropriate used of the L1.

Difficulty in Selecting Tasks Suited to the Students' Level

Several educators have commented on the problem that teachers faced in selecting tasks at the right level of difficulty for their pupils. Van den Branden (2006c), for example, writing about the introduction of TBLT in schools in Flanders (Belgium), found that even after training teachers were not always able to identify tasks at the right level. This problem is not surprising given that one area of TBLT that remains relatively underdeveloped concerns criteria for grading tasks (see earlier discussion of this).

The long-term solution may be research that systematically investigates how specific task variables impact on the complexity of a task. A good example of such a study is Sasayama (2016). She investigated the complexity of four narrative tasks that differed in terms of the number of characters involved in the stories—one of the variables (Robinson, 2003) claimed affects task complexity. She reported that clear differences in learners' performance of the tasks were only evident between the least and the most complex task, suggesting that fine gradations of task complexity do not impact on the actual difficulty of tasks. Studies such as this can certainly help to develop a better understanding of task complexity but, to my mind, they are very unlikely to result in the kind of predictive model that will enable teachers to evaluate the complexity of a task scientifically. This is because tasks are conglomerates of variables and we know very little about they interact to determine difficulty. The solution is that suggested by Willis and Willis (2007): teachers should consult a list of variables that can affect task complexity but treat these as helping to sharpen intuitions about the suitability of a particular task for a particular group of learners. Ultimately, that will have to be decided based on experience.

Teachers also need to recognize that the difficulty of a task is not just dependent on its design features but on how it is implemented. In fact, how a task is implemented is probably more crucial for ensuring a good fit between the task and students (Skehan, 2016). Making a task is manageable by students, then, will involve careful attention to task-preparation variables such as pre-task planning, providing a model of the

performance of the task, brainstorming ideas relevant to the topic of the task and (more controversially) pre-teaching the language needed to perform the task. See Ellis (2019a) on task preparedness.

Implementing TBLT in Large Classes is Difficult

The management of large classes is a major problem irrespective of the teaching approach but it is perhaps greater in TBLT where the teacher often has to share control with students and so cannot direct proceedings. One solution is small group work, which has a major place in TBLT, but this can be difficult to organize, especially in classrooms where desks are arranged in traditional rows and the groups cannot be easily monitored by the teacher. It is possible, however, to conduct tasks in lockstep with the whole class. In the case of input-based tasks, this is required but it is also possible with output-based tasks if the information is split between the students and the teacher. For example, in a Spot the Difference task, the teacher could hold one picture and the students the other. In Prabhu's (1987) Communicational Language Teaching Project, the teacher first performed a task with the whole class before asking the students to perform a similar task by themselves, an approach that Prabhu adopted partly because he doubted the value of groups but also because of its suitability for large classes. Closed tasks may be easier to handle in a large class, because they make it easier to see if students have accomplished a task successfully and to provide feedback on how well they performed it.

Lack of Task-Based Resources

One of the factors that van den Branden (2006c) identified as important for the effective introduction of TBLT is ensuring that teachers have the task-based materials they need. But these are often lacking. Erlam (2015) interviewed teachers who had completed an in-service training course to investigate to what extent they were able to implement TBLT. She reported that one of the main difficulties the teachers mentioned was the lack of suitable materials. In fact, there are very few truly task-based courses that teachers can just take off the shelf and use in their classrooms so often teachers need to prepare their own tasks. Many modern textbooks, however, even though they are not task-based, do contain tasks and teachers can extract these tasks and plan task-based lessons around them. That is, instead of starting with the exercise-type activities that typically precede a task in these course books, they can adopt Johnson's (1982) deep-end strategy and start with the task and then use of the exercises in the post-task stage of the lesson if the students demonstrate a need for linguistically focused practice. Perhaps, the problem of the lack of resources will lessen as TBLT becomes more mainstream and publishers respond by publishing task-based courses.

Grammar in Task-Based Teaching

Teachers tend to be concerned about grammar, but grammar is not the only aspect of language that is important. As I have already noted, the early stages of language learning are lexical. Help in building vocabulary, including formulaic chunks, is very important in TBLT and achievable in a number of ways—in the pre-task stage of a lesson through direct teaching, through focus on form as learners perform a task, in the planning and reporting stages in Willis' task cycle, and in the post-task stage.

One of the criticisms levelled at TBLT is the lack of grammar. According to Sheen (2003), there is 'no grammar syllabus' in TBLT and its advocates 'generally offer little more than a brief list of suggestions regarding the selection and presentation of new language'. Swan (2005) claimed that TBLT 'outlaws' the grammar syllabus. It is true that there is no grammar syllabus in TBLT, but it is wrong to claim that there is no grammar. Grammar has a place in both the main-task stage—in the incidental attention to grammatical features in 'focus on form'—and, more clearly, in the post-task stage when explicit grammar instruction and traditional practice exercises have a place to address any grammatical problems evident in the performance of a task. Focused tasks—not welcomed by all advocates of TBLT—have a role to play here as they create a communicative context for the use of a specific grammatical feature and enable teachers to observe whether learners are able to use it correctly.

The critics' objection to TBLT really concerns their rejection of explicit grammar instruction. All advocates of TBLT advise against the a priori teaching of grammar as a way of preparing students to perform a task. Both Swan and Sheen favour presentation–practice–production where there is a grammatical syllabus, and each structure is presented and practised. Tasks serve as the means for providing communicative practice of the target structure. In effect, the critics are advocating a task-supported approach. A key question is the relative effectiveness of task-based and task-supported approaches, and there is a clear need to investigate this. However, there are problems in designing the kind of method-comparison study needed, and it not surprisingly that there have been few such studies. One of the best studies to date is Shintani (2016). She provided clear evidence of the superiority of task-based instruction over task-supported for very young, beginner-level learners of English.

Perhaps, though, it is unnecessary to insist that one approach is superior to the other. It is more a question of the instructional context and the stage of development of the learners. Long (2015), an ardent supporter of task-based instruction, acknowledges that in some instructional contexts, where teachers are used to a more traditional type of teaching, it might be an idea to smooth the way to the full introduction of TBLT by starting with task-supported teaching. In Ellis (2019b), I advanced the case for a modular syllabus, where there are separate task-based and task-supported components. Delinking the task-based and the task-supported components overcomes the danger of learners focusing primarily on form when performing tasks in the task-based component. I proposed that a complete language programme should be initially task-based, but the task-supported component could kick in when

learners had achieved functional communicative ability as a way of addressing continuing grammatical problems. I suggested, however, that the task-supported component should be not be based on a grammatical syllabus but on a checklist of potentially problematic grammatical structures—an idea floated by Nunan (1989)—that teachers could consult when deciding if there was a need to teach a specific structure. Evidence for this would come from observation of learners' performing tasks in the task-based component of the syllabus.

Preparing Students for Formal Examinations

In many instructional contexts, teachers have to prepare students for formal examinations where the focus is on grammar and the ability to use the target language correctly. The question arises, then, as whether TBLT is feasible in such contexts as teachers will naturally feel that they have to teach to the examination. It is worth pointing out, however, that TBLT can foster grammatical development. Beretta and Davies' (1985) evaluation of Prabhu's Communicational Language Teaching Project found that learners in the TBLT group outperformed the learners that received grammar-focused instruction in a contextualized grammar test although not in a discrete point test. Shintani (2016) reported that TBLT resulted in better acquisition of plural-s (a structure problematic for Japanese learners of English) than PPP. The input-based tasks in Shintani's study were of the focused kind that made if functionally necessary for the young learners to pay attention to whether a noun was singular or plural. Focused tasks, then, constitute a way in which teachers can prepare students for a formal examination without resorting to explicit grammar instruction.

It likely, however, that teachers will still feel the need to address grammar directly. A practical solution to this problem would be for teachers to adopt the kind of modular approach I suggested above—splitting the available teaching time between explicit instruction and TBLT. In the long run, however, this problem may disappear if task-based assessment replaces traditional forms of assessment.

Teachers May Lack Training in TBLT

This is one the 'real issues' that Long (2016) identified if TBLT was to move forward. Teachers are unlikely to be successful in implementing TBLT unless they have a clear understanding of its theoretical bases and practical know-how about how to implement it. There is some evidence that TBLT figures in undergraduate courses for trainee language teachers (e.g. Ogilvie & Dunn, 2010) and TBLT certainly figures in in-service courses for practising teachers (e.g. Erlam, 2015) and in courses that are part of an MA in TESOL/Applied Linguistics programme. However, many short teacher

preparation courses (e.g. the Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults—CELTA) pay scant attention to TBLT, instead emphasizing traditional approaches for teaching phonology, lexis and grammar and the four language skills.

Ellis (2020) proposed a framework for developing a TBLT training course by identifying key factors relating to:

1. Course content (e.g. distinguishing a 'task' and an 'exercise'; ensuring that teachers understand that tasks can be input-based as well as output-based; examining examples of task-based materials)
2. Methodology of TBLT (e.g. utilizing training activities that require the same kind of experiential, discovery learning as TBLT; asking trainees to develop and try out their own tasks)
3. Uptake of TBLT (e.g. where possible providing training within teachers' own schools; ensuring there is adequate and ongoing support for implementing TBLT in the teachers' own schools).

Van den Branden (2006c) provides an account of a training programme that introduced TBLT into elementary and secondary schools in Flanders that illustrates these principles in action.

Conclusion

The history of language teaching is replete with approaches that fall in and out of fashion. The 1950s was the decade of Audiolingualism and the 1960s Situational Grammar Teaching. In the 1970s, humanistic approaches such as Suggestopedia and Community Language Learning became popular. From the 1980s, communicative language teaching took over, developing eventually into task-based language teaching. Each of these approaches came with its own theory of learning and language, design principles and sets of techniques and procedures. Each approach claimed to foster the development of the ability to communicate. Should we expect that TBLT will first flourish and then flounder as some of these other approaches have? TBLT differs from previous approaches not just because of its strong theoretical base (in SLA and education) but because of the support it has received from a growing research body of research. However, the problems and issues I discussed in the previous section suggest that there are major obstacles in its way. These problems will need to be addressed if TBLT is to flourish—in particular, there will need to be well-designed training programmes. If I were to make a prediction, it would be that TBLT will find its place not as an alternative to structure-based approaches but alongside them. Perhaps, then, the challenge ahead is how best to construct a balanced curriculum that incorporates both a task-based module and a structure-based one.

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