

Hirao School of Management Review 第9卷

Task-Based Language Education: Reflections on Implications and Criticisms

Arthur Huber

Hirao School of Management, Konan University

【Abstract】

This paper gives a brief account of the development of task-based language teaching (TBLT), from its initial aim as a critical response to both the “synthetic approach” and Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP), to its current usage in language learning contexts, as well as its own criticisms. Several models of task-based frameworks are mentioned, including Skehan (1996), Willis (1996), Ellis (2003) and Nunan (2004). This paper also cites research and empirical evidence to counter major criticisms towards TBLT. Finally, emphasis is placed on how teachers may develop and implement proper curricula that would best reflect the ideals of the TBLT approach, particularly for English Language Learners (ELLs) in a Japanese university setting.

【Keywords】

Task-based Language Teaching, TBLT, TBLL

1. Introduction

To begin, let us first acknowledge that task-based learning has long been a part of teaching strategies for much of human history. The idea that one must practice performing a specific task in order to replicate it independently is a commonly understood teaching concept across all disciplines. Additionally, tasks involved with *language learning* are also not new, yet it has mainly been in the last 30 years where definable characteristics and certain constructs have been put forth in this area.

These days, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has taken on a more integrative role in language learning programs rather than simply an option that may or may not be considered in course planning (Bryfonski and McKay, 2017; Harris, 2018). In general, TBLT is not necessarily concerned with explicitly focusing on specific forms, but rather on using the target language to ‘authentically’ communicate in meaningful ways (Skehan, 2003). It is, therefore, meant to focus on meaning-oriented production rather than traditional form-focused approaches to second language acquisition (SLA).

In order to avoid confusion on what is meant by the word *task*, let us take a definition offered by Kris Van den Branden (2006) as it applies to language learning:

A *task* is an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language. (p.4)

Language teachers, therefore, have a responsibility to ensure the objectives/goals for such tasks are clear, relevant and engaging to their learners. This article will explore research on how some teachers have approached TBLT, the benefits of task-based instruction to learners, some common critiques of TBLT, and where TBLT may fit in for ELLs in a Japanese university context. However, before looking at relevant TBLT studies, let us briefly examine the basis of TBLT and the alternative models it has attempted to supplant, or at the very least, deemphasize.

1.1 *Synthetic Approach vs TBLT*

For a long time, TBLT was secondary to the main construct of language-learning, the “synthetic approach” (Wilkins, 1976). This approach was an attempt to explicitly teach the individual pieces of language (e.g., grammar and phonetics) as a means for learners to later *synthesize* and reconstruct them into a logical, linear whole as they progressed towards fluency. Unfortunately, observations of the synthetic approach often fell short of expectations, and the idea that language was learned linearly has been discounted by much research since (Wyse & Styles, 2007). Additionally, it was pointed out that while many language learners recognized forms, they had consistent difficulties reproducing with accuracy under spontaneous conditions (Long and Crookes, 1992, 1993). Further complications arose when presented with connected speech by native speakers, which could often be incomprehensible to language learners, sometimes in spite of years of study. Obviously, language teaching needed to be reevaluated, and TBLT was proposed as a viable, contrastive approach.

In India, an influential 5-year longitudinal study seemed to confirm noticeable benefits of TBLT in action (Prabhu, 1987). This helped foster interest by SLA researchers to study TBLT, including Long (1985), Crookes (1986), Long & Crookes (1992), Bachman & Palmer (1996), and other TBLT proponents such as Ellis (1996), Skehan

(1996), Willis (1996) and Nunan (2007) to name a few. In turn, the importance and necessity of TBLT as an alternative seemed finally on its way to wider recognition and application.

In time, TBLT became regarded as a response to the “synthetic approach,” which some educators felt was already rife with problems and ready to be updated due to its top-down style. Whereas the synthetic approach adhered to a strict focus on individual forms in an external-internal style, the TBLT approach sought to invert this in an internal-external manner, taking those forms and having learners use them in ways that had better real-world applicability. As a result, TBLT has become one of more modern approaches in the attempt to create meaningful communication. A subsequent issue, however, was *standardization*. That is, which method of TBLT should educators follow?

2. TBLT Frameworks

Attempts to establish a general framework of TBLT soon gained momentum, though still without a unifying construct. However, it was not without significant efforts. For instance, Willis' (1996) idea of task-based teaching consisted of the following three relatively simple conditions:

- 1) Pre-task (introduction to the topic);
- 2) Task-cycle (includes actual task, planning, and report); and
- 3) Language Focus (final analysis and additional practice).

Skehan (1996:54), on the other hand, outlined *four* methodological stages for implementing tasks in a slightly different pattern. Each of his stages consisted of a *goal* and typical technique. For example, Skehan (1996) asserted the importance of the first stage, “Pre-emptive work,” which involved planning and providing a language foundation from which to advance to actual tasks that did not overwhelm a learner’s cognitive load.

Next, after sufficient pre-task preparation had been completed, the second stage involved the *execution* of that task. Here he also underscored the importance of managing the level of difficulty to properly suit the students’ levels. Again, this harkened back to his idea that a learner’s cognitive load should not be burdened in the process of language learning.

Skehan then presented two additional stages after the task, named “Post 1” and “Post 2” as in ‘post-task.’ In Post 1, there was a public performance, initial analysis and encouragement/direction to promote accuracy. Post 2 then concerned itself with linking back to original task goals as well as to other previous tasks, a task repetition, a further analysis, and a final synthesis of everything presented.

Along with these frameworks, Samuda (2001) also affirmed the role of the teacher in providing learners with both explicit and implicit task-based goals. Though in Samuda's study, she advocated pre-task group-work phases, followed by a teacher-led “language focus” stage whereby the explicit and implicit ways of expressing modality were presented to learners.

Nunan (2004) agreed that task-based instruction was necessary, but that it should come at the very end of a task-based syllabus after exposure to a main input. A sample of Nunan's task-based syllabus (adapted from Oxford, 2006) was presented in the following order:

- 1) Schema building
- 2) Controlled practice
- 3) Authentic listening practice
- 4) A focus on form (linguistic elements)
- 5) Freer practice (“communicative activities”)
- 6) The (communicative) task itself

Ellis (2006) preferred to keep a task-based framework as simple as possible. In his most basic structure, he stated three phases and examples of options:

- Phase A – *Pre-task* (Structuring an activity, planning, doing a similar task)
- Phase B – *During Task* (Time pressure & number of participants)
- Phase C – *Post-task* (Learner report, consciousness-raising, and task repetition)

According to Ellis, this allowed for a comprehensive platform that could easily transition in and out of a selected task. Notice how Ellis came back to Willis' (1996) guidelines, despite a decade worth of varying and increasingly complex TBLT frameworks.

3. Benefits of Task-based Language Teaching

TBLT developed as a response to the limitations of other methods and techniques in language-learning as previously mentioned. Too often were language-learners subject to activities only significant in the classroom and thus TBLT aimed to change this dilemma by allowing learners to access their overall knowledge and use it in ways that would function both in and out of the classroom. Tasks were not part of a fixed dialogue, but open to it and other interpretations. TBLT also demanded greater interactivity and problem-solving skills through language.

There were, however, teachers still confused about the main differences between the task-based approach and Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP), and for good reason. Oftentimes these two seemed to overlap rather than be at odds with each other. Some would go as far as to argue that each cannot be equally compared as TBLT is an *approach*, while PPP serves as a *procedure*, and thus they are complementary and supportive rather than competing methods (Dowling, 2017).

4. TBLT vs. PPP

Though similarities do exist, there are numerous distinguishable traits of task-based language learning and the method of Presentation-Practice-Production (Foster, 2009). For one, PPP has often been considered constrained by its artificiality and textbook drills, whereas TBLT attempts to provide realistic scenarios and meaningful tasks. Furthermore, TBLT requires its participants to produce a solution, or arrive at a goal. PPP, on the other hand, has been criticized as being merely concerned with students replicating models and drills, then reproducing models independently from the main model with little variation beyond the confines of a scaffolded drill. Another difference includes TBLT's interactive approach. As mentioned, PPP requires students to produce *predetermined* drills, whereas TBLT encourages spontaneity and incorporation of diverse language in context (Westwood, 2006). In addition, TBLT also requires a higher level of thinking skills in order to arrive at a solution or goal (Foster & Tavakoli, 2009). This

replicates natural language and communication rather than set scripts, which do not account for much variation.

As mentioned earlier, significant research has been done in TBLT in the last 30 years.

5. Selected Studies of Task-based Language Teaching

The efficacy of TBLT has been a somewhat contentious topic, though many studies have attempted to resolve inhibitions of adapting it in the classroom. For instance, Toth (2008) examined task-based grammar instruction in a teacher vs learner-led discourse, finding that teachers still remained the greater facilitator even during task-based activities. In the study, 78 participants taking beginning Spanish as an L2 were to learn the grammar involved in the Spanish clitic *se*. The participants were split into three groups, with 28 under the guidance of whole-class teacher-led discourse (TLD), 25 in small-group learner-led discourse (LLD), and the remaining students as a control group. After seven lessons on the grammaticality of the clitic *se*, they were given post-tests to evaluate performance. It is important to note that the two tested groups, TLD, and LLD were given the same tasks to perform. Those specific tasks involved “describing a picture, narrating an event, and comparing two halves of an information pool” (Toth, 2008:244). As mentioned earlier, the TLD group performed much better, scoring higher on post-test results compared to pre-tests. This lent credence to TBLT if led correctly by a teacher.

Another study done by Tavakoli & Foster (2008) proved how negotiating meaning could affect the complexities of narrative storytelling. To accomplish this, they examined English language learners (40 in London and 20 in Tehran) and their ability to describe a story using cartoon picture prompts. The narrative tasks were of varying structure, described as “loose or tight,” with the term “loose” meaning the story was interpretable in many ways and may or not be straightforward. “Tight” referred to the opposite, that is, the storyline was easily decipherable from start to finish. These picture prompts also differed in terms of storyline complexity, which included the addition or omission of background events in each scene. The primary results indicated that better accuracy correlated with a “tight task structure.” This meant that the storylines depicting a clear beginning, middle and end elicited an increase in accurate production. Furthermore, results also made it evident that more background information produced higher levels of syntax usage.

In a different approach to TBLT studies, Ruso (2007) decided to use a questionnaire, diaries and semi-structured interviews as a way to inquire *learners* directly about TBLT and glean pertinent data. This was a remarkable contrast to a majority of studies that focused primarily on the teacher and curriculum. Instead, Ruso was interested in learner opinions of TBLT and its process. She found that her learners enjoyed “opportunities to express themselves” and craved variety. Moreover, learners felt that the teacher needed to act as the facilitator of communication. If these were followed, according to the students, then TBLT would be a successful and desirable approach in the class.

6. Major Criticisms of TBLT

Not all studies have proven so fruitful in their results, and so have fueled debate on the usability and reliability of TBLT. Some critics have argued that tasks cannot be repeated in such a way as to garner precise results. That is, TBLT is not a predictable

gauge of learner ability. Still, other critics deny the applicability to beginning learners because they have no pool of background vocabulary and grammar skills to navigate competently through a task (Swan, 2005). Such critics feel that TBLT is directed at mainly intermediate learners or higher levels (Ellis, 2003). There have also been complaints about the over-importance placed on TBLT, which distracts from other pertinent knowledge and may hinder development in attention to finer details. Finally, some critics claim that most studies involving TBLT have concentrated their efforts on adult learners, and so transferability to young learners cannot be easily assumed (Foster, 2009). Advocates of TBLT have attempted to address many of these concerns.

7. Responses to Criticisms

First, advocates of task-based learning and teaching have refuted the claim that individual tasks cannot provide substantive, repeatable results. They argue that well-developed and properly executed tasks exist and have been implemented in significant studies. Foster (2009, p.252) contends that provided tasks are well-planned and goals/objectives clearly set forth, then “...variation in L2 task performance has been accounted for and is not significant.” In other words, deviations in performance are normal and a part of task-based learning, with the assumption they remain in the realm of the goal for the lesson.

To address the second issue of beginning learners, we can look to Duran and Ramaut (2006) and their guide for TBLT specifically for beginning language learners. Their analysis came from an examination of Dutch L2 learners in Belgium. They believed that “newcomers” in school, who were required to learn an L2, ought to be able to both socialize and understand directives by the teacher first. This included asking and responding to questions as well.

For absolute beginners, Duran and Ramaut (2006) also believed reading and writing should not be the most immediately targeted skills. Instead, they emphasized *listening* and *speaking* development, and the ability to listen and respond appropriately to directions. In their example task, a teacher presents two pictures with minor differences. The learners must then work together to notice the differences, while also receiving guidance and input from the teacher. In this way, interactive language is elicited via directives as well as questions and responses.

Advocates of TBLT deny critics' claims of TBLT as an often over-stated method in its implications and importance in the classroom. Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden (2019) acknowledge the error in attempting to portray any one approach as the most ideal or best way. Moreover, Foster (2009) does not attempt to argue for TBLT as the ultimate method. In fact, most researchers who tend to understand the applicability of TBLT are realistic in its implications as a complement to standard teaching (Long, 2016). As a consensus, however, they prefer TBLT take the complementary role rather than an optional, supplementary role for the sake of variety and useful real-world production.

8. Japanese University ELL Context

With an array of options and strategies, as well as ongoing confusion about how one should incorporate an easily applicable TBLT approach, where does this leave ELLs in the Japanese university context? While research is still ongoing to address this, thankfully, educators and researchers have been working towards more targeted, proven activities, with better course planning, as well as more transparent guidelines that can be

applied in a multitude of teaching contexts using TBLT as a means of task-based *support* or as task-based *design* (Li, Ellis, & Zhu, 2016; Sato 2010). Furthermore, a TBLT approach need not abandon all other methods or procedures to be functional. As an example mentioned earlier, PPP may be adjusted to fit certain parameters within the TBLT approach.

In addition, Harris (2018) rightly points out that an all-encompassing TBLT approach may not be suitable in all situations, and that explicit teaching may need to be included alongside TBLT. In fact, he contends, interviews with language teachers in Japan seem to indicate that beginner ELLs require a softer approach altogether as they are still in the process of adding to a lexical and syntactic repository from which to draw upon when attempting a task.

9. Further Discussion

Clearly, task-based language-learning and teaching have increased in prevalence in the L2 learning environment. Though many would agree with certain inherent advantages of natural output using TBLT, still others cannot readily adopt it. Concerns have ranged from its intended audience to its over-stated impact on the dynamics of the language-learning environment. While a growing amount of adult learner studies support it, more studies should be carried out in order to better assess its applicability towards a variety of learners. At the very least, TBLT provides an alternative to standard approaches and allows for variation. This is both appealing to the learner and teacher, which can increase enthusiasm and motivation (Dörnyei, 1994).

Still, there are other less addressed factors that should be influential when designing and implementing TBLT. Iizuka (2019) points out that many TBLT studies fail to take into account a *needs analysis*, which could often reveal the most pertinent areas and activities for learners, as well as where to start with TBLT implementation. This echoes Yashima's (2000) observation that there exist two very separate goals for Japanese ELLs, namely for the purpose of successful test-taking, and the other goal being for useful communicative competence in English. Consequently, in any TBLT construct, it would serve to take these into consideration as well so as to align with both teacher and student expectations when aiming for successful stakeholder outcomes.

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