
Task-based language teaching: Responding to the critics

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ABSTRACT

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) aims to facilitate language learning by engaging learners in interactionally authentic language use. It assumes that, as in L1 acquisition, a language is best learned when it is used as a tool for communicating rather than being treated as an object to be studied. This article discusses a number of different versions of TBLT. It illustrates the difference between a 'task' and an 'exercise' and describes different kinds of tasks (i.e., input-based vs. output-based; focused vs. unfocused). It then discusses a number of common criticisms or limitations of TBLT (e.g., 'TBLT is not appropriate for beginner-level learners' and 'TBLT neglects grammatical accuracy') and shows that these constitute misconceptions of what TBLT involves. It concludes with a consideration of a number of genuine problems (e.g., how to sequence tasks according to difficulty) and a call for empirical studies to investigate the relative effectiveness of TBLT in comparison to more traditional approaches to teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an approach to teaching a second/foreign language that seeks to facilitate language learning by engaging learners in the interactionally authentic language use that results from performing a series of tasks¹. Tasks are workplans that

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¹ TBLT can be considered to be one type of communicative language teaching (CLT). In a weak form of CLT, tasks serve as the means of implementing the free production stage in

provide learners with the materials they need to achieve an outcome specified in communicative rather than linguistic terms. For example, in the Heart Transplant Task learners are given information about four people requiring a heart transplant, told that only one heart is available, and asked to decide who is most deserving of the transplant. Such a task may lack situational authenticity (unless the learners happen to all be surgeons) but the interaction that it gives rise to is likely to resemble the interaction that occurs when people engage together to solve a problem in real life. It is in this sense that such a task can be considered to lead to interactionally authentic language use. It is interactional authenticity that is fundamental in TBLT, although when it is possible to identify the specific 'target tasks' a group of learners will need to perform – as in the case of specific purpose language teaching – situational authenticity also becomes important. Language learning arises from the interactions generated by a task whether this is situationally authentic or pedagogic in nature.

The theoretical rationale for TBLT lies in the claim emanating from SLA that language learning is best achieved not by treating language as an 'object' to be dissected into bits and learned as set of 'accumulated entities' (Rutherford, 1988), but as a 'tool' for accomplishing a communicative purpose. In other words, 'learning' does not need to precede 'use', but rather occurs through the efforts that learners make to understand and be understood in achieving a communicative goal. In a sense, then, TBLT seeks to replicate the conditions that prevail when a child learns his/her first language. Children are not taught language but pick it up through interacting with their caretakers. However, as the classroom constitutes a very different learning environment from that found in the intimate family contexts of first language acquisition, TBLT – through the selection of tasks and how they are implemented – seeks to create contexts suited to the more formal conditions of instructed learning. There is now a sufficient body of research to show that the interactions resulting from the performance of tasks in a classroom

a present-practice-produce (PPP) sequence in a structural approach to teaching. A strong form of CLT is synonymous with TBLT, as it entails using tasks as the basis for the design of a course. In Ellis (2003) I referred to this distinction in terms of the difference between 'task-supported' and 'task-based' instruction.

resemble - in many respects - those found in child language acquisition in the home (see, for example, Ellis's (1999) account of the mother-child interactions from Wells (1985) and the teacher-class interactions in Johnston (1995)).

The analogy of TBLT and caretaker- child talk is an important one because it helps to address a common misunderstanding about TBLT – namely that its sole purpose is to improve fluency by helping learners practise the language they already know. Caretakers talk with their children to bond with them and to help them learn their language. Similarly, in TBLT, talk is the means by which the teacher and students bond together and create opportunities for learning. In both, there is an affective and a cognitive dimension to the talk. TBLT requires the teacher to function more like a caretaker than a traditional pedagogue. In both caretaker-talk and TBLT, however, the aim is not just to 'communicate' but also to assist 'learning'. TBLT does not just serve as a means of helping students to use the linguistic knowledge they have already acquired but serves as a source of new linguistic knowledge. Tasks, then, serve a dual purpose. They do not just contribute to the development of learners' fluency and confidence in communicating in the L2 but also as a means for building on and adding to existing linguistic resources. Just like caretaker talk.

Task-based talk, like caretaker talk, caters to incidental rather than intentional learning. That is, it provides opportunities for consolidating partially acquired language and acquiring new language not by designating linguistic items as 'targets' for learners to study and master but by facilitating the social and cognitive processes of 'picking up' language while they are communicating. A crucial aspect of task-based talk, then, is 'focus on form' (Long, 1991). As learners communicate, attention is drawn to the specific linguistic features that learners need to comprehend or to produce in pursuit of achieving the outcome of the task. This can be achieved in a number of pro-active and reactive ways (Ellis, Basturkmen & Loewen, 2001). The teacher can prime the learner with the language they will need to perform a task or he/she can feed this language into the actual performance of the task by responding to their efforts to communicate, for example, by negotiating for meaning or for form. In this way, tasks do not just promote fluency but accuracy also. Task-based teaching requires a primary focus on meaning but it

also provides for a focus on form. Its strength lies in the fact that attention to form is contextualized in learners' own attempts to make meaning. It helps learners to see what linguistic forms they need to express the messages they want to understand or produce. In this way, it helps learners to see how form is mapped onto the meanings that are important to them as they perform a task.

Task-based language teaching is, however, an 'approach', not a 'method' (Richards & Rogers, 1986). As such, it does not narrowly prescribe a set of techniques to be used. Nor is it possible to treat task-based teaching as a uniform way of teaching. There are different versions of TBLT, as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Differences in TBLT approaches

Characteristic	Long (1985, 1991)	Skehan (1998)	Ellis (2003)
Natural language use	Yes	Yes	Yes
Learner-centredness	Yes	Yes	Not necessarily
Focus on form	Yes – through the negotiation of meaning	Yes – mainly through pre-task	Yes – in all phases of a TBLT lesson
Tasks	Yes – unfocused and focused	Yes- unfocused	Yes – unfocused and focused
Rejection of traditional approaches	Yes	Yes	No

Long, Skehan and Ellis differ somewhat in their conceptualization of TBLT. They all agree on two essential features – TBLT aims to create contexts for natural language use and to provide occasions for 'focus on form'. They differ, however, in whether or not they view TBLT as learner-centred. In Long's and Skehan's versions of TBLT, learners perform tasks in small-group work and focus-on-form is mainly

restricted to the pre-task and post-task stages of a lesson. In Ellis's version, however, tasks can be performed in small groups but also in a teacher-class participatory structure where there is opportunity to focus-on-form during the performance of the task. These proponents of TBLT also differ in the kinds of tasks to be used. Long and Ellis propose that both unfocused tasks (i.e., tasks that have been designed to elicit general samples of language use) and focused tasks (i.e., tasks that have been designed to create a communicative context for the use of specific target-language features, such as a particular grammar structure) have a place in TBLT. Skehan, in contrast, sees little value in focused tasks and argues just for unfocused tasks. Finally, whereas Ellis proposes that TBLT can be used alongside more traditional approaches in a modular language curriculum, Long and Skehan clearly see TBLT as an alternative to traditional approaches. These differences will become important when I examine the misconceptions evident in critics of TBLT, as these critics have viewed TBLT as monolithic rather than differentiated – as a 'method' rather than as an 'approach'.

Before beginning my discussion of the misconceptions evident in critiques of TBLT, two clarifications are in order. First, a clear distinction needs to be made between task-based language teaching and task-supported language teaching. The former requires a syllabus in which the content is specified entirely in terms of the tasks to be performed (i.e., there is no linguistic specification). The latter is based on a linguistic syllabus: that is, tasks serve as a means of providing opportunities for practising pre-determined linguistic items. Such tasks will by necessity be of the 'focused' kind. However, rather than serving as stand-alone activities they fit into the 'production' phase of a traditional present-practice-produce (PPP) methodology.

A second point of clarification concerns the kinds of tasks that figure in task-based teaching. There are various ways of classifying tasks but one that is especially important is the distinction between 'input-based tasks' and 'output-based tasks'. The difference lies in whether production (speaking or writing) is or is not required on the part of learners. Input-based tasks can be performed by learners listening or reading the information provided by the task. Speaking or writing is not required but it is also not prohibited. Learners can elect to produce if they chose to do so. Output-based tasks require production. Learners

have to speak or write to achieve the task outcome. As we will see, some of the misconceptions about TBLT are founded on the false assumption that all tasks are output-based.

Not surprisingly, since TBLT constitutes a radical departure from traditional approaches to language teaching based on a linguistic syllabus, it has aroused considerable criticism. Proponents of traditional approaches, such as Swan (2005) and Sheen (1994, 2005), have attacked it on the grounds that it is the product of SLA researchers who 'legislate by hypothesis' without producing any evidence that it is more effective in developing communicative abilities. Others such as Widdowson (2003) and Seedhouse (2005) object to it on more rational grounds, declaring that the construct on which it is based (i.e., the 'task') is fundamentally flawed. Seedhouse also rejects it on empirical grounds, arguing that the interactions that tasks give rise to are impoverished and encourage pidgin-like communication. Whereas these critics appear to reject TBLT out of hand, Littlewood (2007) seeks to adapt TBLT to make it more compatible with the cultural norms of countries where the roles of teacher and students are clearly distinguished, but in so doing he substitutes task-supported teaching for task-based teaching. Finally, there are critics such as Carless (2004), who do not reject TBLT on theoretical or empirical grounds, but question the practicality of its implementation by teachers and demonstrate the problems that can arise in such contexts as Hong Kong.

I will not respond to each of these critics individually. Instead, I will identify a number of general misconceptions that underlie their criticisms. In so doing, I will draw on and extend the discussion of the misconceptions that I considered earlier in Ellis (2009). I will then conclude with some comments on the very real problems that can occur when TBLT is introduced into classrooms.

MISCONCEPTION 1: THERE IS NO CLEAR DEFINITION OF 'TASK'

Widdowson (2003) argued that "the criteria that are proposed as defining features of tasks are [...] so loosely formulated [...] that they do not distinguish tasks from other more traditional classroom activities" (p.126). Widdowson seizes on the definition provided by Skehan (1998b):

- *meaning is primary*
- *there is a goal that needs to be worked towards*
- *the activity is outcome-evaluated*
- *there is a real-world relationship*

He argued, with some justification, that Skehan's use of the term 'meaning' is indeterminate as it does not distinguish semantic and pragmatic meaning. He claimed that it is not clear what Skehan means by 'goal' and that the nature of the 'real-world relationship' is not specified. He dismissed the third criterion on the grounds that a successful outcome to a task may not result in any learning, if only minimal language is involved. Finally, he questioned whether the kinds of tasks that Skehan mentioned (e.g., completing a family tree) have any relationship to the real world. Clearly, if the concept of a task cannot be explicitly defined, task-based teaching will have no validity.

Doubtlessly, Widdowson would be critical of my own definition of a task:

1. The primary focus is on message.
2. There is some kind of gap.
3. Learners need to use their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources.
4. There is an outcome other than the display of language.

However, I would argue that these criteria can effectively distinguish a 'task' from an 'exercise' and will illustrate how. In the two following activities (from Ellis, 2010), there is a clear difference between the first (an exercise) and the second (a task).

In the exercise, learners are not required to produce their own messages; they simply substitute items in the model sentences given to them. There is no gap as the students can see the information contained in both Mary's shopping list and Abdullah's store. They do not need to use their own linguistic resources as model sentences and the vocabulary they need are given to them. Finally, there is clearly no outcome other than the display of correct language. This activity is a situational substitution exercise but not a task.

Look at Mary's shopping list. Then look at the list of items in Abdullah's store. Work with a partner. One person is Mary and the other person is Mr. Abdullah. Make conversations using 'any' and 'some'.

Mary: Good morning. Do you have any ___?

Abdullah: Yes, I have some or No, I don't have any.

Mary's Shopping List

- | | |
|------------|------------------|
| 1. oranges | 4. powdered milk |
| 2. eggs | 5. biscuits |
| 3. flour | 6. jam |

Abdullah's Store

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------------|
| 1. bread | 7. mealie meal flour |
| 2. salt | 8. sugar |
| 3. apples | 9. curry powder |
| 4. tins of fish | 10. biscuits |
| 5. coca cola | 11. powdered milk |
| 6. flour | 12. dried beans |

Student A:

You are going shopping at Student B's store. Here is your shopping list. Find out which items on your list you can buy.

- | | |
|------------|------------------|
| 1. oranges | 4. powdered milk |
| 2. eggs | 5. biscuits |
| 3. flour | 6. jam |

Student B:

You own a store. Here is a list of items for sale in your store. Find the items that Student A asks for that you do not stock.

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------------|
| 1. bread | 7. mealie meal flour |
| 2. salt | 8. sugar |
| 3. apples | 9. curry powder |
| 4. tins of fish | 10. biscuits |
| 5. coca cola | 11. powdered milk |
| 6. flour | 12. dried beans |

The second activity is very different. Here learners have to create their own messages. There is an obvious gap as Student A cannot see Student B's information and vice-versa. The students are provided with some vocabulary, but they are not provided with any models to imitate. They will need to ask questions (e.g., 'Do you have oranges') and provide meaningful responses (e.g., 'Sorry, no') but how they formulate these messages is left to them. Finally, there is a clear outcome other than 'practising language' – the list of items that Student A was able to purchase and the list of items that Student A wanted but Student B did not stock. This is clearly a 'task' according to the criteria I have given.

My purpose in comparing these two activities is not to claim that the 'task' is superior to the 'exercise'. Arguably, both have a place in language teaching, in accordance with my view that TBLT does not have to replace more traditional forms of teaching but can be used alongside them. However, if the aim is to create a context for more natural language use, then clearly the task is more likely to achieve this than the exercise.

MISCONCEPTION 2: 'TASK' HAS NO CONSTRUCT VALIDITY

The construct validity of 'task' as a unit for organizing teaching rests in the extent to which specific tasks result in the kind of language use they are intended to elicit. For example, one of the stated purposes of a task is to elicit negotiation of meaning sequences to address the communication problems that arise when the task is performed. As already noted, a task is a workplan. The key question then is whether it is possible to predict the language use that occurs when a task is implemented (e.g., whether the predicted negotiation of meaning sequences actually occur). Seedhouse (2005) claimed that the task-as-workplan has weak construct validity because the interaction that transpires when learners perform a task frequently does not match that intended by designers of the task. He went on to claim that it is impossible to plan a language course based on tasks-as-workplans.

There is plenty of evidence to demonstrate that the task-as-workplan does not always result in the anticipated use of language. Coughlan and Duff (2003) drew on sociocultural theory to show that the 'activity' that results from a 'task' varies according to the specific motives that different learners have for performing the task. They

showed that the same picture-description task resulted in very different kinds of activity when completed by an adult ESL learner in Canada and a group of high school EFL learners in Hungary. Whereas the adult ESL learner constantly engaged the researcher by means of comprehension checks and requests for assistance, the EFL learners engaged in very little off-task dialogic talk. They varied considerably in how they approached the task with some simply naming the objects in the pictures and others using the pictures to talk about their personal experiences. Also, the same task led to different activities when performed by the ESL learner at different times. The problem becomes more pronounced in the cases of focused tasks as learners may simply choose to avoid using the linguistic feature(s) targeted by the task.

However, while the relationship between task-as-workplan and the activity it gives rise to is not perfect, a task does have predictive value. Skehan (2001) has shown that specific design features affect the accuracy, complexity and fluency of the resulting language. For example, a task containing information with a well-defined structure elicits fluent language use, while a task with a complex outcome elicits greater complexity of language use. Foster and Skehan (1996) have also shown that, if students have the opportunity to plan before they perform a task, the resulting language is more fluent and more complex. Yuan and Ellis (2003) reported a study that showed that giving learners plenty of time to perform a task encouraged the kind of online planning that led to greater accuracy. In other words, it is possible to predispose learners to focus on different aspects of language use by manipulating task design and implementation variables.

Seedhouse's critique is based entirely on tasks designed to elicit spoken output. But, as noted above, tasks can also be input-providing. It is much easier to design such tasks in a way that obligates learners to process the linguistic input contained in the task. Later, I will consider a study (Shintani, 2011) that did just this.

MISCONCEPTION 3: TASKS RESULT IN IMPOVERISHED LANGUAGE USE

Seedhouse (1999) claimed that the performance of tasks is characterized by indexicalized and pidginized language as a result of

the learners' over-reliance on context and the limitations of their linguistic resources. As such, he argued, tasks are unlikely to lead to successful learning. The same point was made by Widdowson (2003): achieving a successful task outcome may not result in any learning if only minimal language is involved.

Seedhouse provided examples of the kinds of impoverished interactions resulting from the performance of tasks. However, he misses some essential points. First, if the learners are beginners then using single words, simple formulaic chunks and sentence fragments unmarked for tense, aspect or number is entirely natural, reflecting the kind of language that is typical of such learners, as described by Klein and Perdue (1997). The natural process of learning a language involves a progression from the 'pre-basic variety' to the 'basic variety' and eventually to a 'post-basic variety'. Tasks cannot be dismissed simply by showing that learners resort to a pre-basic variety when performing them. Grammaticalization is a slow and gradual process.

Second, the type of language use that results from a task depends on the design features of the task and how it is implemented. There is plenty of evidence in the task-based literature to show that tasks can result in highly complex language use. Opinion-gap tasks elicit more complex language use than information-gap tasks (Rulon & McCreary, 1986). Pre-task planning enhances both lexical and grammatical complexity (Foster & Skehan, 1996) and so too does task repetition (Bygate, 1996). Certain types of focus-on-form (for example, 'prompts') push learners to reformulate their utterances in target-like ways.

The types of language use that occur when tasks are performed depends in part on the learners' stage of development and the linguistic resources available to them at that stage, in part on the task-as-workplan, and in part on how the workplan is implemented. The claim that tasks in general, for all learners, only lead to highly simplified language use is clearly misconceived.

MISCONCEPTION 4: TASK-BASED TEACHING IS NOT SUITED TO BEGINNER-LEVEL LEARNERS

This is one of the most common misconceptions I have encountered. It is reflected clearly in Littlewood's (2007) comment that speaking tasks are difficult for learners of low proficiency and result in 'minimal

demands on linguistic competence'. The assumption that underlies such a comment is obviously correct: learners cannot be expected to speak in an L2 until they acquired some resources in the language. The misconception lies in the unwarranted assumption that TBLT necessarily involves speaking tasks.

It is true that much of the research that has investigated TBLT has utilized speaking tasks, but in fact TBLT can involve tasks that address any of the four language skills. Earlier I pointed out that tasks can be input-based as well as output-based and clearly input-based tasks are better suited to beginner-level learners. Ellis (2001) reviewed a number of studies involving what he called Listen-and-Do Tasks. For example, in the Kitchen Task, low proficiency learners listened to instructions about where to locate kitchen objects (represented in numbered pictures) in a kitchen (represented by a diagram of the kitchen). They demonstrated their understanding of the instructions by writing the number of the correct picture in the correct position in the diagram of the kitchen. Ellis was able to show that performing this task resulted in learners learning the words labelling the kitchen objects. Shintani's (2011) study described below demonstrated that such Listen-and-Do tasks can be used successfully with *complete* beginners.

Children do not begin the process of acquiring their L1 by speaking it. They spend a considerable amount of time listening to input and matching what they hear to objects and actions around them. TBLT provides an opportunity for beginner learners to learn in the same, natural way. They can build up their L2 resources through performing input-based tasks and later use these to start speaking. Such tasks have another advantage. They help to reduce the anxiety that some learners experience when asked to communicate in the L2 (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Listening (and perhaps even more so reading) in an L2 are considerably less threatening than having to speak. Some learners, however, do prefer to try to speak in the L2 from the start. Input-based tasks do not prohibit learners attempts to speak; they simply do not require it.

In short, TBLT is not only well-suited to teaching learners of low proficiency, but in many respects is better suited than more traditional methods that require speaking from the beginning. The only way that traditional methods can elicit speaking from learners is by carefully

controlling their output by providing models and slot-and-fill exercises. Input-based tasks provide learners with an opportunity to experience interactionally authentic language use from the start.

MISCONCEPTION 5: TBLT NEGLECTS GRAMMATICAL ACCURACY

I have already pointed out that the aim of TBLT is not just to develop the learners' fluency but also their linguistic accuracy. However, this is not acknowledged by some critics who argue that there is no teaching of grammar in TBLT. Sheen (2004), for example, claimed that in task-based language teaching there is 'no grammar syllabus' and went on to argue that proponents of TBLT 'generally offer little more than a brief list of suggestions regarding the selection and presentation of new language'. In a similar vein, Swan (2005) insisted that TBLT 'outlaws' the grammar syllabus. Sheen was also critical of the fact that in TBLT any treatment of grammar only takes the form of quick corrective feedback, allowing for minimal interruption of the task activity.

However, while it is true that TBLT is not based on a grammar syllabus, it is wrong to claim that grammar receives no attention. All advocates of TBLT recognize the need for a focus on grammatical accuracy, but differ in how they consider this can be best achieved. Skehan (1998) proposes that tasks can be designed in such a way that when they are performed learners will need to focus on clusters of grammatical features. Ellis (2003) notes that focused tasks provide opportunities for learners to use a specific grammatical feature that will be 'natural' or 'useful' for performing the task. He suggests that the kinds of grammar practice activities in Ur (1989), which were offered as activities that could be used in the free production stage in a present-practice-produce approach to teaching, could be used as stand-alone focused tasks (i.e., they do not have to be preceded by the presentation of the target structure). However, the principal way in which TBLT addresses grammar is through the implementation of a task. As noted earlier, 'focus on form' is an essential feature of TBLT. The growing literature on corrective feedback (see, Lyster, Saito, and Sato (2013) for a review of this) is illustrative not just of the various ways in which teachers can respond to grammatical (and, for that matter, phonological and lexical) errors in the context of the performance of a task, but also of how corrective feedback is effective in helping learners

to use the target features more accurately. There is also room for metalinguistic explanation of a grammatical feature when learners demonstrate continued difficulty with it. In Samuda (2001), for example, the teacher temporarily suspended the performance of a task that focused on epistemic modals, to provide a brief explanation before asking the students to continue with the task. Such interjections of 'grammar teaching' are compatible with TBLT and, in some cases, may be needed. Finally, input-based tasks can be designed in such a way that they require processing of a specific grammatical feature. For example, a Describe and Draw task can easily be constructed so that learners have to attend to and comprehend the meanings of various prepositions of location.

There are also other ways in which grammar can be addressed in TBLT. A task-based lesson can consist solely of the performance of the task, as in Samuda's study, but it can also include a pre- and a post-task phase. Estaire and Zanon (1994) suggested that the pre-task phase can incorporate some teaching of grammar. This, however, transforms task-based teaching into task-supported teaching. However, if grammar is addressed in the post-task phase the integrity of the task as a workplan for communicating is not compromised. Ellis (2003) suggests various ways in which grammar can be taught in the post-task phase, including explicit presentation and practice exercises.

Thus, while advocates of TBLT differ in how and when they see grammar figuring in TBLT, they all acknowledge the need for a focus on linguistic accuracy in one way or another. In short, TBLT most certainly does not 'outlaw grammar teaching'. Drawing on the importance attached to 'noticing' (Schmidt, 1994), the advocates all propose ways in which learners' attention can be directed to grammatical features. TBLT also draws on the theory of Transfer Appropriate Learning (Lightbown, 2008), which claims that learning is context-dependent. That is, if learners practise using a new linguistic feature in exercises, they will only be able to use that feature in the highly controlled type of language use that exercises elicit. Conversely, if they experience a new grammatical feature in a task-based context where they are struggling to communicate they are more likely to be able to deploy it in contexts that call for communicative language use. From such a perspective, embedding a focus on linguistic accuracy into the performance of the

task is more likely to ensure the kind of learning needed for communicating in the real world than explicit teaching based on presentation and practice exercises.

MISCONCEPTION 6: TBLT REQUIRES EXTENSIVE USE OF GROUP WORK

Swan (2005) claimed that in TBLT the teacher's role is limited. He commented "the thrust of TBLT is to cast the teacher in the role of manager and facilitator of communicative activity rather than an important source of new language" (p.391). In effect, Swan is objecting to the fact that TBLT is learner-centred, implemented through small group work, rather than in teacher-centred instruction. Carless (2004) also questioned the value of the group work he witnessed in the implementation of TBLT in Hong Kong but for a different reason. He noted that in the primary school classes he observed the learners frequently performed tasks in their L1 rather than in English (the L2).

In fact, group work is a favoured participatory structure in all forms of teaching not just in TBLT. Its advantages were clearly documented by Long and Porter (1985):

1. Group work increases language production opportunities.
2. Group work improved the quality of student talk.
3. Group work helps individualize instruction.
4. Group work promotes a positive affective climate.
5. Group work motivates learners.

And it receives a strong recommendation in teacher guides (e.g., Hedge, 2000; Ur, 1996). Thus, the first response to the criticism that TBLT requires extensive use of group work is that it is not alone in this.

However, the claim that TBLT requires the performance of tasks in groups is mistaken. Again, this misconception may have arisen from the fact that so much TBLT research has investigated speaking tasks which learners perform in pairs or in groups. Some advocates of TBLT (e.g., Prabhu, 1987), however, have rejected group work. Prabhu argued that for task-based teaching to be effective learners need to be maximally exposed to good models of the L2 and for this Prabhu saw the need for the teacher to take charge of the task. Input-based tasks such as the Kitchen Task, in fact, require a teacher-class participatory structure; the

teacher provides the input in these tasks and the learners respond non-verbally to demonstrate they have understood. Also, speaking tasks can be carried out with the teacher interacting with the whole class. In an information-gap task, for example, the information can be split between the teacher and the students. The interactions that result provide opportunities for the teacher to be much more than just a manager and facilitator of a communicative activity. The teacher is the source of input (i.e., Prabhu's 'good models') and also can respond to any communicative and linguistic difficulties that arise.

Tasks, then, provide not only a means of instigating communicative activity in group work but are also devices that can enable teachers to control the input that learners are exposed to and to engage in the interactional practices that will help learners to both comprehend and produce L2 utterances.

MISCONCEPTION 7: TBLT REQUIRES AVOIDANCE OF L1 USE

A further common misunderstanding is that TBLT requires both the teacher and students to avoid use of the L1. As Carless (2004) noted, overuse of the L1 can be a problem in some teaching contexts – especially if beginner-level students are asked to perform a speaking task without having developed the requisite linguistic resources. There are, however, ways of reducing learners' overreliance on the L1. The teacher can raise learners' consciousness about the importance of trying to communicate in the L2. Providing time for learners to plan before they start a task will make it easier for them to access the L2 resources they need. Input-based tasks guarantee that learners are exposed to L2 input and also cut down the need for the use of the L1.

In fact, though TBLT does typically tend to discourage use of the L1, research has shown that the L1 can be used effectively by learners to establish the goals for a task and the procedures to be followed in tackling it. Thus, it can serve a valuable procedural function. Also, in accordance with sociocultural theory, the L1 can serve as a useful cognitive tool for scaffolding L2 learner production and facilitating private speech (see, for example, Anton & DiCamilla, 1998). In other words, a strong case can be made for adroit use of the L1 in TBLT. In this respect, good practice in TBLT reflects current views about the value of the L1 for performing such functions as task management, task

clarification, discussing vocabulary and meaning and, in some cases, deliberating about grammar points (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). More importantly, accepting that there is a role for L1 use in TBLT acknowledges the naturalness of code-switching when there is a shared L1 (Macaro, 2001). Many practitioners of TBLT currently acknowledge the value of L1 use, but anticipate that as learners become more confident of their L2 communicative abilities over time they will need to draw on it less. In fact, there is evidence that this can take place quite naturally (Shintani, 2011).

MISCONCEPTION 8: TBLT IS NOT SUITED TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTIONAL CONTEXTS

Swan (2005) argued that TBLT provides learners with only ‘very limited input’ and that it places the emphasis on learner output and thus does not meet the needs of foreign language (FL) learners. He asserted that “TBLT provides learners with substantially less new language than ‘traditional’ approaches” and that “in the tiny corpus of a year’s task-based input, even some basic structures may not occur often, much core vocabulary is likely to be absent, and many other lexical items will appear only once or twice” (p.392). He concluded that TBLT is only suited to ‘acquisition-rich’ environments (i.e., second language (SL) contexts) and is not suited to ‘acquisition-poor’ environments (i.e., FL contexts) where a more structured approach is required to ensure the grammatical resources needed for communicating.

Swan assumes that learners need grammar in order to be able to communicate. However, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that not only do learners not need grammar in order to communicate, but that the early stages of L2 acquisition are agrammatical. As I noted earlier, Klein and Perdue’s (1997) study of beginner learners shows that initially they communicate using a ‘pre-basic variety’, characterized by nominal utterance organization and extensive use of context. Production at this stage involves scaffolded utterances (i.e., utterances constructed over more than one turn) and is context-dependent. Grammaticalization takes place only very gradually and it is some time before finite verb organization appears in the ‘post-basic variety’. Learners acquire grammar gradually and dynamically. From this

perspective, teaching grammar to beginners is of little use unless their developmental readiness for early-acquired features can be determined. This, however, requires considerable expertise and would be impractical in most teaching situations. TBLT avoids this problem by allowing learners to utilize the linguistic resources available to them at whatever developmental stage they have reached. In contrast, the type of approach that Swan favours seeks to teach grammar from the start.

I would argue that TBLT might in fact be better suited to 'acquisition-poor' environments than to 'acquisition-rich ones'. In situations where learners have access to communicative contexts outside the classroom there may be a case for teaching grammar as a way of preventing stabilization (i.e., the temporary cessation of learning), which often occurs in interlanguage development after learners have achieved a basic ability to communicate. In FL situations where communicative opportunities outside of the classroom are limited (e.g., for learners of English in many European and Asian countries), there is an obvious need to provide such opportunities inside the classroom. TBLT is a means for achieving this. Arguably, too, a task-based course is capable of providing substantially greater input than the 'limited input' to be found in many text books based on a more traditional approach.

'LEGISLATION BY HYPOTHESIS'

As I noted earlier, some critics view TBLT as an approach dreamed up by SLA researchers on the basis of a set of unsupported theoretical premises. Swan coined the catchy phrase 'legislation by hypothesis' to dismiss the theoretical basis of TBLT. Along with Sheen, he argued that there is no empirical evidence to support either the hypotheses that construct the theoretical rationale for TBLT or to demonstrate that TBLT is superior to traditional approaches.

In fact, there is considerable evidence to support such hypotheses as the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1994) or the Teachability Hypothesis (Pienemann, 1985) but I will not consider this here. I would also point out that TBLT does not just draw on theories of L2 acquisition but also on general educational theories (see, for example, Samuda and Bygate's (2008) rationale based on Dewey's (1913) views about the importance of teaching founded on 'experience' rather than 'knowledge'). I do

acknowledge that there is a need to show that TBLT is effective and ideally, that it is more effective than traditional approaches (e.g., PPP). Method comparisons are plagued with problems (see Ellis & Shintani, 2013) but, arguably, are still justified in cases where there is controversy about the relative effectiveness of different approaches.

In fact, there have been a few attempts to carry out comparative studies of TBLT and traditional approaches. Neither Sheen nor Swan make any reference to Beretta and Davies' (1985) evaluation of Prabhu's Communicational Language Teaching Project in India. This involved a comparison of TBLT and the oral-situational method (in effect, a form of PPP). On balance TBLT was found to be more effective. While the learners taught by the oral-situational method did better on tests that clearly favoured this kind of instruction, the learners taught by TBLT scored higher on tests biased towards this approach and, crucially, also did better on 'neutral' tests (e.g., a contextualized grammar test; dictation; a listening/reading comprehension test). Sheen (2005) conducted his own comparative study of 'focus-on-form' (TBLT) and 'focus-on-forms' (PPP) reporting that the results showed the superiority of the latter. But his study suffered from a number of methodological flaws the most serious of which – by Sheen's own admission – was that the 'focus-on-form' did not in fact take place as the TBLT learners did not receive any corrective feedback on the target structures. In other words, Sheen compared PPP with poorly implemented TBLT. A much better designed study is Shintani (2011). She compared the effects of TBLT (using input-based tasks) and PPP on the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar by 6 yr old Japanese children who were complete beginners in a study lasting five weeks. She obtained data about the classroom processes as well as the learning outcomes. She showed that the interactions in the two classrooms were fundamentally different. In the TBLT classroom, the learners participated actively, often initiating (first in their LI and then later in English) when they experienced difficulty in comprehending the teacher's input. In contrast, in the PPP classroom, the students were consigned to responding to the teacher's elicitation of their production in initiate-respond-follow-up (IRF) exchanges that research has shown to be so dominant in traditional teaching. Post-tests showed that the TBLT learners acquired more new words and demonstrated better

incidental acquisition of plural -s. This study is interesting also because it provides clear evidence that TBLT is a viable approach with complete beginners and that use of the L1 gives way naturally to use of the L2 over time.

Doubtlessly, neither Beretta and Davies' evaluation study nor Shintani's study will satisfy Swan and Sheen but they do lend support to one of the main claims of TBLT, namely that learners can acquire new linguistic resources through TBLT. These studies also suggest that it may be more effective in this respect than traditional language teaching. Clearly, though, there is a need for further comparative studies involving more advanced level learners. Ideally, too, there is a need for longitudinal studies that examine the effectiveness of TBLT over the long term.

CONCLUSION

TBLT offers a radically different approach to teaching a second language. As such, it is not surprising that its advocacy has met with resistance, especially from those who, for one reason or another, support a more traditional 'focus-on-forms' approach. I have endeavoured to show that many of the criticisms of TBLT are founded on misunderstandings of what a 'task' is and how tasks need to be implemented to ensure that attention is paid to linguistic form. That said, there are a number of problems that both designers of task-based courses and teachers face in making TBLT an effective form of teaching. I will conclude, therefore with a brief discussion of these, noting that many of these problems are in fact also common to more traditional approaches.

Perhaps, the major problem is how to grade tasks in terms of difficulty. For TBLT to work effectively, tasks need to be developed that will provide learners with a reasonable level of challenge at each stage of their development. There are currently no agreed guidelines for determining the complexity of different tasks, although Skehan (2001) and Robinson (2001) have gone some way to identifying the factors that need to be taken into account (e.g., the extent to which a task provides well-structured information and the extent to which it calls for simple information-sharing or elaborate reasoning on the part of the learner). However, it is still not clear how tasks can be sequenced in

a way that takes account of both their linguistic and cognitive difficulty. Nor is it clear how tasks can be ordered to ensure a full and systematic coverage of the linguistic features that learners need to learn. One general principle that could guide the development of a task-based course is the 'input first principle'. That is, a course designed for beginner level learners should be built primarily around input-based rather than output-based tasks with care taken to grade the linguistic difficulty of the input provided in these tasks. Also, input-based tasks can serve as 'pre-tasks' for output-based tasks when these are gradually introduced into a course. The difficulty of grading, however, is not just one that designers of task-based courses face. Traditional courses based on a structural syllabus also face the problem of deciding the order in which grammatical structures should be introduced, as what is an 'easy' structure to teach (e.g., regular past tense -ed) and is thus introduced early is often 'difficult' for learners to acquire. The difficulty of matching the teaching syllabus with the learner's own learning syllabus was one of the reasons for proposing TBLT, which makes no effort to specify which forms learners will learn and when they will learn them.

Evaluation studies (e.g., Carless, 2004; McDonough & Chaitmongkol, 2007) have revealed the kinds of problems that teachers face when implementing TBLT. They show, for example, that teachers do not always have a clear understanding of what a 'task' is and as a result the tasks ended up as 'practice' rather than affording opportunities for genuine communication. Carless found that in the elementary classrooms he observed in Hong Kong there was wide use of the students' mother tongue, discipline challenges arose because of the tension between the need to get the students talking and the need to maintain class discipline, and many of the tasks resulted in non-linguistic activity, such as drawing, rather than use of the L2. Another problem frequently noted is the teachers' lack of confidence in their own L2 oral ability and the fear that TBLT places too much emphasis on oral communication. Teachers are also wary of adopting TBLT in situations where they need to prepare students for high-stakes tests that emphasize grammatical accuracy rather than communicative effectiveness. In some contexts, too, such as those found in China or Japan TBLT threatens the established role of teachers by re-positioning

them as co-communicators rather than as sources of knowledge about the L2.

These are real problems and some commentators (e.g., Littlewood, 2007) argue that the approach adopted must take account of the cultural context in which teaching takes place. Some of the problems (e.g., teachers' lack of oral proficiency) are potentially a threat to any type of language teaching. Other problems (e.g., teachers lack of understanding of what constitutes a task and how to implement TBLT) can be resolved through appropriate teacher training. Any innovation will face resistance and there are established ways of addressing this (see for example Rea-Dickens & Germaine, 2000). One way proposed by Littlewood (2007) is to adapt TBLT by inducting learners into performing tasks through a series of activities that lead them from traditional form-focused exercises to tasks but, as I pointed out earlier, this in effect involves an abandonment of TBLT in favour of task-supported teaching. My own preference is to adopt a modular approach, with one module of the curriculum consisting of TBLT and another, completely separate module based on more traditional approaches. Such a curriculum acknowledges the attested value of formal, explicit instruction – my purpose in this article has not been to deny that – but will also help learners develop the proficiency they will need to engage communicatively in the real world. It will also pose less of a threat to teachers used to traditional approaches.

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The exercise and task appearing on page 8 are reproduced from Ellis (2010) with permission from Cambridge University Press.

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