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*Mohammad Javad Ahmadian,  
María del Pilar García Mayo (Eds.)*

# RECENT PERSPECTIVES ON TASK-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

TRENDS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

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This volume addresses Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) from various perspectives and aims to reflect the epistemological diversity in this area by drawing on multiple perspectives – cognitive-interactionist, complexity theory, sociocultural theory, and pedagogical/curricular. The volume brings together different ideas and theoretical frameworks and showcases distinct but complementary approaches to TBLT.

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**Recent Perspectives on Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching**

# **Trends in Applied Linguistics**

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Edited by  
Ulrike Jessner  
Claire Kramsch

## **Volume 27**

Ali Shehadeh

# Foreword: New Frontiers in Task-Based Language Teaching Research

## 1 Introduction

In the last 30+ years, there has been an enormous interest by researchers, language professionals and practicing teachers worldwide in task-based language teaching (TBLT) as an approach to second/foreign language (L2) learning and teaching and a teaching methodology in which classroom tasks constitute the main focus of instruction. This is evidenced by the numerous publications, symposiums, seminars, colloquiums, academic sessions, conference presentations, and indeed whole conferences that are specifically dedicated to TBLT (Van den Branden, Bygate, and Norris 2009). The most notable of these is the formation of the International Consortium on Task-based Language Teaching (ICTBLT) in 2005 which holds a biennial international conference on the topic, now transformed into a professional association, named International Association for Task-Based Language Teaching (IATBLT). The most recent TBLT conference was held in Barcelona, Spain, April (2017).

Virtually all of these publications, professionals, and academic/professional events speak of the potential value of TBLT for L2 learning and teaching. Based on insights from second language acquisition (SLA) research findings, empirical findings on effective instructional techniques, and cognitive psychology, it is strongly believed that TBLT facilitates SLA and makes L2 learning and teaching more principled and more effective. For instance, Van den Branden, Bygate, and Norris (2009: 11) state:

... there is widespread agreement that tasks, potentially at least, offer a uniquely powerful resource both for teaching and testing of language. In particular, they provide a locus for bringing together the various dimensions of language, social context, and the mental processes of individual learners that are key to learning. There are theoretical grounds, and empirical evidence, for believing that tasks might be able to offer all the affordances needed for successful instructed language development, whoever the learners might be, and whatever the context.

Van den Branden et al. have based these conclusions on the extensive and varied literature on task-based learning, teaching and assessment, which speaks to the potential of TBLT as an approach to L2 learning and teaching and as a teaching methodology (Van den Branden et al. 2009: 1).



In keeping with these statements, TBLT research and implementation has indeed in the last 10 years or so expanded substantially in range and scope to new boundaries. Three areas, in particular, stand out as having received researchers' special attention. These are TBLT in foreign language contexts, TBLT and L2 writing, and TBLT and technology.

The first area that has received researchers' good attention in recent years is TBLT in foreign language (FL), as against second language (SL), contexts, given that most of the TBLT research and implementation has until recently been conducted in SL contexts (for overviews and critiques, see, e.g., Manchón 2009; Ortega 2009; Shehadeh 2012). Towards this end, a number of studies and volumes have focused on research and implementation of TBLT in FL contexts. The former include, for instance, McDonough's research in Thailand (e.g., McDonough 2004; McDonough and Chaikitmongkol 2007, 2010), Robinson's work in Japan (e.g., Cadierno and Robinson 2009; Robinson 2007; Robinson Cadierno, and Shirai 2009), and the extensive work in Spain by García Mayo and her team – the Basque team (e.g., Alegría de la Colina and García Mayo 2009; Azkarai and García Mayo 2012, 2015; García Mayo 2002, 2014; García Mayo and Azkarai 2016) and by Gilabert and his team (e.g., Gilabert 2007; Gilabert, Baron and Llanes 2009). This research also includes studies in collections including Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001); Edwards and Willis (2005); Van den Branden (2006); Van den Branden, Van Gorp and Verhelst (2007); García Mayo (2007); and Shehadeh and Coombe (2010).

The latter include dedicated volumes to the issue including Leaver and Willis's (2004) volume titled *Task-based instruction in foreign language education: Practices and programs*; Shehadeh and Coombe's (2012) volume titled *Task-based language teaching in foreign language contexts: Research and implementation*; and Thomas and Reinders's (2015) volume titled *Contemporary task-based language teaching in Asia*.

It is clear from this review that TBLT research and implementation in FL contexts is firmly on the TBLT map and on the rise.

For TBLT and L2 writing, see for example, the recent volume specifically devoted to the topic by Byrnes and Manchón (2014) titled *Task-based language learning: Insights from and for L2 writing*, a number of articles in the volumes by Edwards and Willis (2005), García Mayo (2007), and Shehadeh and Coombe (2010, 2012), as well as a number of journal articles (e.g., Ellis and Yuan 2005; Kuiken and Vedder 2007a). For TBLT and technology, see for example, two volumes specifically devoted to the topic: the first one is by Thomas and Reinders (2010) titled *Task-based language learning and teaching with technology*; and the other is by González-Lloret and Ortega (2014) titled *Technology-mediated TBLT: Researching technology and tasks*, in addition to a number of articles in the volumes by Edwards and Willis (2005), García Mayo (2007), Leaver and Willis (2004), Shehadeh and Coombe (2010, 2012), and Thomas and Reinders (2015).

Other areas, however, have only received scant attention from TBLT researchers including (i) TBLT and content-based instruction, (ii) TBLT and learner-centered instruction, (iii) TBLT and English for specific purposes, and (iv) TBLT and languages other than English. The main purpose of this chapter is therefore to suggest directions that take TBLT research and implementation to new boundaries along these venues. Indeed, the full potential of TBLT as an approach to L2 learning and teaching and a teaching methodology is yet to be explored. This chapter is a step forward towards extending TBLT research and implementation to these new frontiers and vistas.

## 2 TBLT and content-based instruction

The first line of research to expand TBLT scholarship is to explore the links between TBLT and content-based instruction (CBI). CBI refers to an instructional approach that delivers non-linguistic curricular content (e.g., science, mathematics, geography, social studies, etc.) in the medium of the L2 which learners are learning. A lucid and concise dictionary definition of CBI is provided by Richards and Schmidt (2010: 125) who define CBI as “a method that integrates language instruction with subject matter instruction in the target language, for example, studying science, social studies or mathematics through the medium of English in a content-based ESL program.” Similarly, Lyster and Ballinger (2011: 279) define CBI as “an instructional approach in which non-linguistic curricular content such as geography or science is taught to students through the medium of a language that they are concurrently learning as an additional language.” Examples of CBI include language across the curriculum, content-based learning (CBL), content-based language teaching (CBLT), content and language integrated learning (CLIL), immersion programs in Canada, and sheltered second language education programs in the USA, UK and Australia.

Through its focus on both subject-matter *and* language teaching, CBI provides students with a context for meaningful and purposeful communication in the L2. García Mayo (2015b), for instance, states that “CBI is designed to help learners (i) construct knowledge and develop understanding about a [subject-matter] topic, (ii) use language meaningfully, and (iii) learn about language in the context of learning through language”, which are all in line with the basic principles of TBLT. More significantly, the construct of task itself, which is intrinsic to TBLT, is also central to CBI through its integration of subject-matter and language teaching goals because CBI normally uses tasks that are engaging and cognitively challenging for the learners in order to achieve both content and

language teaching goals (Brinton, Snow, and Wesche 1989, cited in García Mayo 2015b: 1).

In spite of that, the links between TBLT and CBI have been so rarely explored (Ortega 2015: 103). Only recently did researchers start to examine the TBLT-CBI interfaces (see, e.g., Basterrechea and García Mayo 2013, 2014; Basterrechea, García Mayo, and Leeser 2014; Van den Branden 2009; Van Houtven, Peters, and Van den Branden 2013). Based on studies carried out by himself and his team of researchers in the Belgian context, Van den Branden, for instance, maintains that supportive, long-term teacher training and teacher development might constitute the basis for the success of any TBLT-CBI innovations.

*System's* recent special issue (Vol. 54) however, guest-edited by García Mayo (García Mayo 2015a), constitutes the first serious attempt at exploring the links between TBLT and CBI. This thematic issue contains eight studies that have investigated task implementation in CBI/CLIL educational contexts in Canada (Lyster); Finland (Nikula); Belgium (Van Gorp and Van den Branden); Spain (García Mayo and Lázaro Ibarrola, and Pérez-Vidal and Roquet); Spain and Poland (Juan-Garau and Jacob); Austria, Finland and Spain (Llinares and Dalton-Puffer); and Japan (Butler). These studies explored the links between TBLT and CBI using quantitative and qualitative research methods, and taking as their participants children and adolescents from various L1 backgrounds learning Dutch, English and French as an L2.

The studies document the opportunities and challenges of utilizing TBLT in CBI contexts. They all attest to the deep commonalities between both of these two educational approaches, and the rise in implementing TBLT in CBI/CLIL contexts, in Europe in particular. For example, García Mayo and Lázaro Ibarrola (2015) examined differences in amount of negotiation for meaning on a spot-the-difference task between children at two age groups (8–9 vs. 10–11) in a CLIL context, as compared to an EFL context. Data were collected from 80 children who were paired to form 40 age- and proficiency-matched dyads (20 EFL, 20 CLIL). The researchers analyzed the children's oral production to identify the different strategies these two age groups used to complete the task. The investigators found that "CLIL learners negotiate more and resort to the L1 less frequently than EFL learners. On the other hand, older children in both contexts negotiate less and use the L1 more frequently than younger children" (p. 40). García Mayo and Lázaro Ibarrola suggest that the findings of their study show that the links between age (younger children vs. older children) and context (EFL vs. CLIL) are multifaceted and that all these four variables interact with one another in different and interesting ways to produce different results (see García Mayo and Lázaro Ibarrola, 2015 for complete discussion of these findings and their implications for TBLT-CLIL research and the classroom situation).

In her commentary on the eight articles comprising the special issue, Ortega (2015: 107) holds that “[A]ll the contributions in this special issue bear witness to the richness and multidimensionality of CLIL and TBLT learning” and therefore the benefits of TBLT-CBI/CLIL instruction must not be reduced to linguistic benefits only. She explains:

The innovations offered when L2 instruction integrates language-and-content in well-designed task structures hold great promise for optimal linguistic learning, yes. But as many of the studies in the special issue show, they also aim at promoting the learning of (a) academic content, (b) social, contextual, interactional, and identity dimensions of using a new language, (c) transcultural learning, and (d) technological literacy learning (Ortega 2015: 107).

As mentioned above, *System’s* special issue constitutes only a first step towards exploring the links between TBLT and CBI, but it also opens up for a number of future research directions in this venue as suggested by the guest-editor, Ortega’s commentary on the special issue, and the investigators themselves. In her commentary on the various themes addressed by the eight articles, Ortega (2015), in particular, points to two other themes for researching the links between TBLT and CBI. The first theme relates to the roles of the teacher. Echoing Van den Branden’s (2009) remark mentioned earlier that long-term teacher development might be the basis for the success of any TBLT-CBI innovations, Ortega argues that future research must address teachers’ attitudes and views because some investigators examining the TBLT-CBI interfaces, in *System’s* special issue and elsewhere, have found that “many CLIL teachers have misgivings about neglecting content-related learning goals when language learning goals, in their perception, are overemphasized” (p. 108). The second theme relates to the status of L1 in the TBLT-CBI/CLIL pedagogy. Citing a number of foreign language educators’ views arising from the current special issue and other works in varied EFL and CLIL settings, which held different or seemingly opposing positions on the use of L1, Ortega reiterates Moore’s (2013) conclusion that “the roles for the L1 are multiple and complex rather than wholesale deleterious or beneficial” (p. 108). Calling for more research in this area too, Ortega suggests that “researchers and teachers in CLIL and TBLT ought to find common ground in the argument that not all uses of the L1 are equal, nor are they all exclusively deleterious or beneficial out of context” (p. 108).

Finally, one might also like to know whether and to what degree CBI supports the development of wider student learning capacities including L2 learning, and conversely, whether and to what degree TBLT supports the development of wider student learning capacities including subject-matter learning.

### 3 TBLT and learner-centered instruction

The second direction to expand TBLT research and implementation is to explore whether and to what degree TBLT successfully utilizes the underlying principles of learner-centered instruction (LCI) in L2 teaching and learning.

In the last 20 years or so, there has been a noticeable shift towards learner-centered instruction (LCI) in education in general, and L2 teaching in particular. In L2 teaching, the consequence of this shift was a change from teacher-centered/directed instruction (a teaching situation in which most decisions are made and carried out by the teacher based on his/her priorities) to learner-centered instruction (a teaching situation that makes the learner “central to all aspects of language teaching, including planning teaching, and evaluation”) (Richards and Schmidt 2010: 326–327). LCI promotes such concepts as learner independence, students’ self-evaluation, individualized instruction, student-student interaction, pair and group work, and collaborative learning. More specifically, LCI is a teaching situation in which:

- Learners take part in setting goals and objectives of their learning.
- There is concern about learners’ needs, likes, dislikes, feelings and values.
- There is concern about learners’ prior knowledge.
- There is concern about learners’ different learning styles and learning preferences.
- Learners are seen as active, rather than passive, participants in the learning/teaching process.
- Learners take much of the responsibility for their own learning.
- Learners are actively involved in shaping how they learn. They co-construct knowledge rather than just receive knowledge.
- There is ample teacher-student and student-student interaction.
- Self-corrections/repairs are favored over peer-corrections/repairs or teacher-corrections/repairs.
- There is an abundance of brainstorming activities, pair work and small group work.
- The teacher is seen as a facilitator of learning rather than an instructor or lecturer who spoon feeds learners with knowledge (see Benson 2007; Richards and Schmidt 2010).

As can be surmised, this shift in L2 learning and teaching from teacher-centered/directed instruction to learner-centered instruction fits well with TBLT, which also makes the learner central to all aspects of the learning and teaching process (see above). Viewed from this perspective, it is possible to argue that TBLT can potentially be an ideal platform for implementing the basic principles of LCI.



Indeed, research has shown that *task-based pair and group activities* that are generated by students themselves, or are sensitive to the students' preferences, ensure: (i) that students take on responsibility for much of the work, (ii) greater student involvement in the learning process, and (iii) that the teacher is free to focus on monitoring and providing relevant feedback (e.g., Shehadeh 2004, 2005), which are all major characteristics of LCI. Similarly, research has also shown that *task-based self-initiated, self-completed repairs* (a major characteristic of LCI) must be encouraged in the L2 classroom, not just because these are more prevalent and more frequent than other-initiated, other-completed repairs, but also because self-initiated self-completed repairs as internal attention-drawing devices, rather than other-initiated, other-completed repair as external attention-drawing devices, are more facilitative of L2 learning (Izumi 2002; Shehadeh 1999, 2001).

It follows that the second line of research to expand TBLT scholarship is to explore whether and to what degree TBLT successfully utilizes the underlying principles of LCI in L2 instruction. For instance, such research might investigate issues like: (i) Whether and to what degree students are actually taking part in setting the goals and objectives of their learning in a TBLT-based setting, (ii) Whether and to what degree students are taking much of the responsibility for their own learning, (iii) Whether and to what degree students are actively involved in shaping how they learn, and (iv) Whether and to what degree students are given sufficient time and opportunity for self-correction/repair before peer-correction/repair or teacher-correction/repair in the L2 classroom.

The last point, in particular, is quite important when we know that some classroom studies have observed that students are not given sufficient time or opportunity to self-correct in a classroom situation. For example, McHoul (1990) observed that teachers initiated corrections “either (a) immediately a trouble-source is over, with usually no gap occurring or (b) immediately the repairable [i.e., the trouble-source] itself is spoken/heard” (p. 375). McHoul goes on to say that “The latter cases of other-initiations either (i) overlap the trouble-source turn or (ii) interrupt it. In instances of (i), teacher and student can both be heard to be speaking, albeit briefly, at the same time. In instances of (ii), the student immediately yields the floor to the teacher” (McHoul 1990: 375).

## 4 TBLT and English for specific purposes

English for specific purposes (ESP) and its subsidiary fields of English for vocational/occupational purposes (EVP/EOP) and English for academic purposes (EAP), like LCI discussed above, also make the learner central to the learning

and teaching process. ESP is a branch of English language teaching (ELT). The aim of an ESP course or program of study is to teach English to students in a *specific professional field* or *specific area of knowledge*. ESP instruction was first developed in the late 1960s in response to a need for targeted assistance for learners from non-English speaking countries who were studying or working in English-speaking countries. Instruction in ESP is determined by the specific needs of a particular group of learners. The concept of needs and needs analysis is perhaps the major component that distinguishes ESP from general English. For instance, Wette (in press) states that an ESP course is distinguished from a general English course by its “substantial emphasis on the necessity to establish and meet the needs of learners and other stakeholders through the selection of relevant genre exemplars, language items and instructional tasks from real-world contexts.” Thus, ESP is based on designing courses that meet learners’ needs by:

- meeting learners’ target situation needs (product) and learning needs (process).
- meeting their specific learning goals.
- meeting their specific interests and likes/dislikes.
- using authentic language, materials, texts, examples, samples, demonstrations, illustrations, tasks, activities, projects, etc. from the learners’ actual and specific professional field, domain of knowledge, or discipline like engineering, biology, medicine, business, tourism, banking, commerce, media, law, etc.

Since its inception, ESP has continued to expand in range and importance, in part due to the growth and expansion in the global use of English in trade, business, science, technology, education and research, and in part due to the increasing role of English as a lingua franca in international and intra-national communication (Paltridge and Starfield 2012; Wette, in press, for recent overviews of ESP history, development and scope). Nonetheless, in spite of that and in spite of the striking similarities between the underlying principles of ESP and TBLT (e.g., both put the learner at the centre of the learning-teaching process, both use authentic language, both use an abundance of tasks and activities, and both are guided by specific learning goals and objectives), surprisingly only very few studies to date have investigated ways of utilizing and implementing TBLT in ESP contexts (e.g., Alwi 2015; Hager and Lyman-Hager 2004; Horiba and Fukaya 2012; Macias 2004; Stark 2005; Weaver 2012; Widodo 2015).

For instance, Macias (2004) describes a task-based Spanish for Specific Purposes (SSP) program designed for professionals in the fields of healthcare and real estate in California, USA. The researcher documents the successes and challenges she faced in teaching this kind of student body. Stark (2005) describes a task-based syllabus she developed for her English business students in the

Faculty of Economics, University of Fribourg, Switzerland. Stark's findings show how task-based learning can be successfully achieved within a management context that enables learners to use English as a working language. In a recent study, Widodo (2015) explored the potential of designing and implementing a task-based framework for vocational English (VE) materials in the secondary education sector in Indonesia. Findings of the study show that task-based materials successfully promote active engagement in language learning by VE secondary school students.

The third line to expand TBLT scholarship is therefore to move towards the world of ESP and its subsidiary fields of EVP/EOP and EAP. These can constitute interesting and rich educational environments and venues for investigating the potential of designing, utilizing, and implementing the principles of TBLT in authentic educational settings.

## 5 TBLT and languages other than English

The fourth and final line of research proposed in this chapter for moving the TBLT field forward is exploring TBLT research and implementation in languages other than English. As stated in the introduction to this chapter, TBLT is an approach to L2 learning and teaching and a teaching methodology. So in theory, TBLT principles should apply to the teaching and learning of *any* second or foreign language, not just English. For example, Leaver and Willis (2004: 47) argue that “task-based instruction can be used successfully for nearly any language” (see also, for example, the quote by Van den Branden et al. (2009) cited in the introduction to this chapter). Nonetheless, most of TBLT scholarship comes from settings in which *English* is the second or foreign language. For instance, Shehadeh (2012: 4), commenting on existing TBLT research, points out that “most of the scholarship on TBLT ... comes from *English* as a second and/or foreign language contexts” (italics in origin). Shehadeh based his conclusion on a thorough review of existing literature on TBLT that has appeared across many journals, edited volumes, monographs, and special issues in refereed journals. It must be admitted, however, that this is not unexpected because *English* is currently the most widely taught and learnt language in the world, and is certainly the one in which there exists most research on virtually any field of study or discipline.

Nonetheless, many other languages in the world are taught and learnt as a second or foreign language, and therefore are worthy of investigation by TBLT researchers. Some researchers did explore the potential of researching and implementing TBLT in languages other than English (e.g., Alesh 2004 (Arabic); Fernández García 2007; Macias 2004; Ortega 2005; Toth 2008; Van Altena 2004

(Spanish); Hager and Lyman-Hager 2004; Kuiken and Vedder 2007b; Swain and Lapkin 1998 (French); Leaver and Kaplan 2004 (Slavic languages); Peters 2007 (German); Saito-Abbott 2004 (Japanese). For example, Saito-Abbott (2004) describes a task-based Japanese program in the Japanese Department at California State University, USA. The study describes the use of task-based teaching at very beginning levels of instruction and documents the advantages and challenges of using tasks in such programs. Kuiken and Vedder (2007b) investigated the cognitive complexity of the task and the complexity of the linguistic output. The researchers collected data from 76 Dutch university learners of French as a second language. Results of the study show that students did not perform significantly better on the cognitively less complex tasks than the cognitively more complex tasks used in their study. On the other hand, the researchers did find greater linguistic accuracy on more complex tasks than less complex tasks. Toth (2008) compared quantitative and qualitative results for task-based L2 grammar instruction conducted as whole-class, teacher-led discourse (TLD) and small-group, learner-led discourse (LLD). The researcher collected data from 78 university low-level English-speaking learners of L2 Spanish. Results of the study showed stronger performance by TLD learners, suggesting a potential for teachers to facilitate L2 learning by directing learners' attention to specific target language structures.

As can be deduced from this review, however, the number of studies exploring TBLT in languages other than English is still very low and the field is in need of more extensive TBLT research in this area, too. This is important if TBLT is to be considered a comprehensive approach to L2 learning and teaching whose underlying principles and assumptions can apply to *any* L2 learning and teaching situation, not just English as an L2.

## 6 Conclusion

Task-based language teaching has stood the test of time for over 3 decades. During these 30+ years, it has expanded and still expands in range, scope, complexity and importance as an approach and a methodology to second/foreign language learning, teaching and assessment. No wonder many teachers around the world are shifting their teaching practices toward TBLT based on the strong belief that TBLT facilitates SLA and makes L2 learning and teaching more successful and more effective. Indeed, it is now well-established that TBLT represents an innovation in L2 learning and teaching at both theoretical and methodological levels. From a theoretical perspective, TBLT views SLA as a process not directly influenced by formal instruction but which is fostered through the meaningful