Task-Based Language Teaching

A reader

Edited by
Kris Van den Branden
Martin Bygate
John M. Norris

Task-Based Language Teaching

A reader

Edited by

Kris Van den Branden
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

Martin Bygate
University of Lancaster

John M. Norris
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

.

Task-Based Language Teaching

Task-Based Language Teaching:
Issues, Research and Practice (TBLT)

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an educational framework for the theory and practice of teaching second or foreign languages. The TBLT book series is devoted to the dissemination of TBLT issues and practices, and to fostering improved understanding and communication across the various clines of TBLT work.

Editors

Martin Bygate
University of Lancaster

John M. Norris
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

Kris Van den Branden
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven

Volume 1

Task-Based Language Teaching. A reader
Edited by Kris Van den Branden, Martin Bygate and John M. Norris

Series editors' preface

With this volume we are happy to inaugurate a new book series entitled *Task-Based Language Teaching: Issues, Research, and Practice*. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is an educational framework for the theory and practice of teaching second or foreign languages. It builds upon ideas in philosophy of education, theories of second language acquisition, empirical findings on effective instruction, and the challenges of language learning and use in the contemporary world. Though there is broad interest in the potential value of TBLT to enable worthwhile language teaching and learning, there is also considerable diversity in the theoretical scope, research, and applied practice that corresponds with the TBLT name.

The idea for a book series devoted to this framework and its diverse applications originated from synergistic activities and interest in TBLT, including a firmly established conference series, the creation of an *International Consortium on TBLT*, and burgeoning global attention to tasks and language learning in research, educational policy, and classroom practice. With an eye towards fostering cutting-edge work that further defines and advances this domain, we seek to publish a mix of edited and authored volumes that reflect the range of work underway in exploring and using task-based principles for educational purposes in a variety of language learning contexts worldwide. Our scope is intentionally broad, and we hope to include not only research on task-based learning but also rigorous reports of task-based ideas at work in the design, implementation, and evaluation of language teaching courses and programs. Ultimately, our hope is that this series will provide teachers, researchers, graduate students, policy makers, and other readers a primary locus for carrying forward a much needed intellectual discourse about TBLT.

In this first entry, we offer a reflective point of departure for the series. Though diverse roots can be traced considerably earlier, academic publications on TBLT began to appear in the 1980s. To date, hundreds of journal articles and book chapters, as well as some 20 monograph-length volumes, have been published on a variety of topics related to TBLT. Major refereed journals have also featured special issues on TBLT in recent years (including *Language Teaching Research*, *Language Testing*, and *ITL International Journal of Applied Linguistics*). In light of these developments, our objective in this first volume was to bring together some of the key articles and chapters that have shaped the field and the discourse of TBLT. We have selected 20 important contributions from the first two decades of TBLT literature, highlighting the genesis of task-based principles,

early ideas on the development of task-based curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and representative research into variables affecting task-based learning. In addition, we have composed short guiding introductions to each section in the book, as a means for situating the chapters in their important historical and thematic contexts.

In closing, we are very grateful to Kees Vaes and to John Benjamins Publishing for their interest in this book series, and for their sustained support of applied linguistics in general. We join them in welcoming readers to the series, and in encouraging proposals for new volumes. It is our hope that you will enjoy reflecting on the development of TBLT as you peruse the chapters in this book, and we look forward to carrying on with the important discussions they have initiated.

Martin Bygate, John Norris, Kris Van den Branden

Table of contents

Task-based language teaching

Introducing the reader

Kris Van den Branden, Martin Bygate & John Norris

1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has increasingly attracted the worldwide attention of SLA researchers, curriculum developers, educationalists, teacher trainers, language testers, and language teachers. In the 1980s, the term was coined, and the concept developed, by SLA researchers and language pedagogues, largely in reaction to a broad consensus that had emerged around what were seen as shortcomings in teacher-centered, form-oriented second language classroom practice. Since then, tasks have been used increasingly as a fundamental point of departure by:

a. SLA researchers to construct and carry out research on task-based performance, and on instructed second language acquisition,

b. curriculum developers and pedagogues to construct and conceptualize curricula and syllabuses for second language education,

c. teachers and school teams to organize educational activities in the second language classroom,

d. language testers aiming to follow up on, and document, the progress second language learners make.

Today, task-based language teaching is being promoted in many countries around the globe as a potentially very powerful language pedagogy, claimed to stimulate the second language development of both children and adults. At the same time, the empirical evidence that documents how, and to what extent, task performance can promote language learning, is steadily growing and diversifying. As a result, some twenty years after the first publications on tasks and language learning, we now have reached the stage when it makes sense to reflect on several of the more prominent themes that have emerged in the TBLT discourse.

Although the literature on tasks and TBLT is now both extensive and varied in focus, it is scattered across many journals, edited volumes, monographs, and internal working papers. There is no single volume, for instance, that brings together key publications that have driven the TBLT field forward and that have been particularly successful and influential in inspiring teachers or researchers to work with tasks. This volume aims to take one step in that direction. It brings together 20 articles and book chapters that have shaped the

field of TBLT since the 1980s; the intent of this collection is to provide the reader with a solid introduction to some of the crucial issues in TBLT theory and practice that have been addressed during the field's initial stages of development.

In this first chapter, we will briefly summarize the basic pedagogical principles behind TBLT and trace a few of the historic roots for this particular approach. We will also point to different variants of TBLT that have been proposed and tried out, and to the different interpretations circulating in the field of applied linguistics of what TBLT stands for. In doing so, we aim to provide the reader with a basic framework of reference that can be used to situate the selections in this volume in their historical and intellectual perspective, and to locate some of the discussions and debates that these writings have given rise to within a broader educational perspective.

At the end of this chapter, we outline the structure and contents of the volume, and discuss its target audience. We also highlight the criteria that we used to determine our final selection of articles in this volume.

2.   TBLT: origins and principles

Most scholars, curriculum developers, and language teachers will agree that the basic aim of second/foreign language teaching is to enable students to use the target language for func-tional purposes. However, with regard to *how* second/foreign language teaching should be organized, so as to optimally promote language development, there appears to exist far less consensus. During the past 50 years, a multitude of pedagogical models and approaches (from Total Physical Response to the Natural Approach, from Audiolingualism to Communicative Language Teaching) have been proposed by applied linguists and educationalists, promoted by syllabus developers and teacher trainers, and tried out by teachers and students in the lan-guage classroom. At the level of implementation, the list of differences between these various educational models is seemingly endless. However, on a somewhat more general level, most of these differences can be boiled down to a number of basic dimensions of language education:

A. *Holistic versus discrete learning*: one fundamental choice that needs to be taken when organizing language education, is whether language should be treated as discourse in use rather than in discrete bits. The discrete approach starts from the idea that language is a complex system that must be broken down into smaller units (such as isolated words or grammar rules); these units first need to be mastered by learners before they will be able to use language in functional situations. In holistic approaches, the language learner is directly confronted with the challenge to use language (receptively, productively) for functional purposes and to integrate various subskills and different kinds of linguistic knowledge in task performance. In a holistic approach, the student is expected to induce knowledge about smaller units from their actual performances and communication challenges in complex situations.

B. *Teacher-centered versus learner-driven education*: In the classroom, fundamental choices also need to be made as to the division of roles between students and teachers. In teacher-centered classroom interaction, the teacher occupies most of the speaking time, while also controlling turn-taking behaviour, and deciding what topics will be covered at what time. In a teacher-centered approach, the teacher provides input that steers the learning process of the students in a predetermined direction. In more learner-driven types of education, more student initiative is catered to or called for, in terms of determining content and selecting linguistic resources while producing output. Students are encouraged to exploit the complexity of input and output demands in line with their own internal syllabus, needs and capacities, while cooperation among learners is stimulated by means of methodological formats that elicit peer interaction.

C. *Communication-based versus form-focused instruction*: Language use entails manipulating linguistic form to create interpersonal meanings. In language education, primary attention may be paid, by teachers and students, to either form or communication (or to a combination of both). In strong versions of communication-based instruction, the main focus of teachers and learners is merely on achieving adequate mutual understanding of meaning intentions, whereas in strong versions of form-oriented instruction, primary emphasis is on the accuracy and complexity of the linguistic forms that students produce. Choices between these orientations, or the possibility of striking a balance, also constitute a major point of departure for language educational design.

Clearly, each of these basic options offer gradations of pedagogical choice, rather than forming two, mutually exclusive extremes. In many classrooms around the world, the language education that can be observed will show a mixture of holistic and analytic aspects, teacher-centered stages and learner-driven moments, communication focus and form focus. In a similar vein, theory-building seems to follow cycles of form-focused approaches alternating with communication-based ones, and with models in which combinations of the above-mentioned basic dimensions supply the essence of pedagogical theory.

Inspired by skill building theories such as behaviourism, the teaching of languages in many parts of the world was dominated during the 1950s and 1960s by educational models that showed a relatively high emphasis on discrete, teacher-dominated, and form-focused activity. Language learning was claimed to be the result of the gradual accumulation of individually presented, linguistic elements (such as words and rules), which were first presented by the teacher, then practiced in isolation by the learner, and only in a later stage (if at all) integrated into more functional language use. Essentially learners were expected to transfer the explicit knowledge of form into the meaningful, integrated use of language.

From the 1960s on, this approach had to face a growing body of criticism. This was fed partly by theoretical arguments against the basic tenets of behaviourism, and partly by the gradual emergence of empirical research studies, which indicated that processes of second

language acquisition could not be as easily manipulated and directed as the prevailing Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) methodology had predicted. Around that time, the field of foreign/second language teaching, far from being a fully-fledged educational-scientific domain, was heavily influenced by developments in the neighbouring field of (theoretical) linguistics on the one hand, and by a growing body of research in first language acquisition on the other hand. In the field of (theoretical) linguistics, for instance, growing attention was being paid, from the 1960s on, to various aspects of the intentional, functional use of language, as reflected in the growth of work in areas such as semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics. These kinds of work vividly demonstrated that the use of language (performance), rather than being a fleeting and essentially contingent version of the far more complex and stable (and hence allegedly more interesting) linguistic competence in the head of the language learner, was complex and stable in its own right, and deserved the full attention of both researchers and teachers. Meanwhile empirical studies into processes of first language acquisition, such as those conducted by Brown (1973), Bruner (1978), Halliday (1975), and Wells (1981), showed how in natural settings, child language learners, rather than moving from the explicit, declarative knowledge of form to meaningful language use, instead derived their knowledge of language from meaningful use: through participating in social interactions involving meaningful language use, they slowly (and largely implicitly and incidentally) build up an increasingly sophisticated body of knowledge about the forms of their mother tongue.

Together, these different veins of research and theoretical insights underlined the likely importance of constructing educational activities in the language classroom around processes of social interaction, that resembled the kind of social interactions that language learners would participate in outside the classroom, and, in this way, advocated a paradigm shift from discrete, teacher-centered, form-focused language education to more holistic, learner-driven, and meaning-based activities.

Following this discussion, the field of language teaching linked up with similar developments in other domains of teaching, and the educational sciences in general (Samuda & Bygate, 2008; Norris, 2009). Since the beginning of the twentieth century, various educationalists had advocated more holistic, learner-driven pedagogies as an alternative for the teacher-dominated, and heavily knowledge- (versus ability-) oriented teaching that was omnipresent in classrooms around the world. Prominent educational thinkers such as Dewey (1938), Vygotsky (1978), Freinet (1993), and classroom interaction researchers such as Barnes, Britton and Torbe (1986), Mehan (1979), and Wells (1987) argued that the development of complex functional abilities would be optimally stimulated by confronting students with holistic, challenging tasks that they would likely also encounter in real life, inviting them to work together, and develop new insights and skills through exploratory talk and intensive interaction. The call for greater learner autonomy in the classroom came naturally with this paradigm shift. Students were increasingly regarded as active learners, taking on new task demands, acquiring complex skills at their own pace, setting a learning

agenda that could not be as easily manipulated by the teacher as was previously thought. At the same time, rather than social interaction providing a mere forum for the practice of complex social skills, social interaction was now seen to be centrally implicated as the means for deep-level, complex learning. In this paradigm, the role of the teacher shifted to that of coach or partner, supporting the problem-solving activities of the students, enriching their learning experiences by offering appropriate input and feedback, and reflecting upon their learning processes (or stimulating learners to do so themselves).

These ideas found echoes within language teaching. The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) had, in fact, essentially placed functional language use at the heart of language pedagogy. The titles of Widdowson's 1978 volume 'Teaching language as communication', and Allwright's 1984 article 'The importance of interaction in classroom language learning' made this move explicit, as did the work of many others, such as Breen and Candlin (1980), Brumfit (1984), and Johnson and Morrow (1981). However, rather than giving rise to a shift away from traditional discrete approaches to the teaching of language, and to the methods and syllabuses that underpinned them, teachers mainly incorporated the new ideas into their established ways of teaching, as did many syllabus designers and publishers in their existing (and often well promoted) teaching materials. In many contexts around the world, the potential impact of CLT was thus reduced to paying somewhat more attention to the last 'production' stage in what remained an otherwise essentially form-focused learning cycle. That is, many teachers provided new opportunities for turning the knowledge of isolated form into the meaningful use of language in the 'Production' phases of lessons, but otherwise maintained the structural, knowledge-oriented framework for language classrooms. In fact, the implementation of educational innovation, and the tensions that arose between promising models on paper and actual classroom practice, slowly but surely became a research issue in its own right (e.g., Markee, 1997; Van den Branden, 2009).

The emergence of TBLT, placing communication at the heart of teaching procedures, was then a logical development in various ways. For one thing, it cohered with much of the major thinking within CLT. But in addition, it offered a response to the rather partial incorporation of communication work within the field of language education. Furthermore, as we have seen, its emergence was consonant both with parallel evolutions in other domains of education and with empirical research on how language acquisition occurs. Hence the introduction of "task-based language teaching" articulated with modern views on the learning of complex functional abilities and catered for a model of second language education that was systematically conceptualized along holistic, meaning-focused, learner-driven lines. In the seminal publications that launched TBLT, "task" was proposed as a basic unit to describe the three angles of the basic educational triangle: educational goal, pedagogic activity, and assessment.

To describe the goals of a second/foreign language course or program, a recognized procedure in the process of program design (see Munby, 1978) was to carry out a needs analysis of the kinds of language needed by the students for their real world purposes.

Now, however, it was proposed that curriculum developers start from the *tasks* that second language learners need to be able to perform, that is, the functional things that they are supposed to do with the target language (Long, 1985). Tasks were defined as the hundred-and-one things people do—identifiable as bounded recurring activities that people engage in—in order to reach real-world (and very often non-linguistic) ends, and for which they need to use language. Defining the language learning goals of a language course, then, becomes a matter of describing the tasks the language learners need to be able to perform, and describing the kinds of language use that the performance of these tasks necessitates (though see Norris, 2009, on the complexities of goals-setting across diverse language education contexts). Within the framework of TBLT, needs analysis acknowledges the fact that different students may have different language learning needs, or they may need to use the target language in different situations and different domains.

Needs analysis not only informs goal description and goal selection, but at the same time, it provides a direction to the construction of pedagogical activity in the classroom. As in CLT, from a task-based perspective, people not only learn language *in order to* make functional use of it, but also *by making* functional use of it (Van den Branden, 2006). If, for example, teachers aim to stimulate their learners' ability to understand and give instructions, they should confront them with functional tasks in which the learners are asked to produce and understand instructions. As such, some of the traditional distinction between *syllabus*, or what is to be taught, and *methodology*, how to teach, is blurred in TBLT as the same unit of analysis (namely, task) is used (although just what is an appropriate task for different learners, and how tasks might be exploited remains a methodological issue). In this way, TBLT clearly aligns with holistic types of education (in that students are asked to engage in complex behaviour that calls for the integrated use of different linguistic subskills in order to perform pedagogical tasks), meaning-based approaches (in the sense that the primary focus of the learner while performing is on meaning), and learner-driven activity (in the sense that task performance calls for intensive learner activity, and creates ample opportunities for learner initiative and interaction with other learners).

This focus on task, however, was not intended to imply that TBLT would not allow for any form-focused activity, teacher-led or otherwise (as, e.g., was definitely the case in teachers' interpretations of CLT). TBLT is task-*based* in the sense that the performance of functional tasks involving meaningful language use is the starting point, primary mechanism, and final goal of educational activity. However, it allows—even encourages—a focus on form in view of optimizing the learning potential of task-based educational activities. As research has shown (for an overview, see Norris & Ortega, 2000), focus on form, especially when embedded in the meaningful activity that task performance elicits, may increase the efficiency and effectiveness of language learning processes. This attention to the necessity of combining meaning and form, in fact, provides a footing for task-based language education to be a researched pedagogy in the sense that it aims to conceptualize language

education on the basis of what is currently known about how second language acquisition may be fostered via instruction. According to Long and Crookes (1992):

> The evidence of positive effects for instruction does not support a return to a focus on forms (plural) in language teaching, that is, to the use of some kind of synthetic syllabus an/or a linguistically isolated teaching "method" (…). On the other hand, the evidence does motivate a focus on form (Long, 1991), that is, use of pedagogic tasks and other methodological options which draw students' attention to aspects of the language code. (p. 43)

Finally, in line with the choices made about goal selection and the organization of educational activities, in order to assess their functional language abilities, language learners should be confronted with meaningful tasks that elicit language use (Norris, Brown, Hudson, & Yoshioka, 1998). Within a task-based teaching and learning setting, the assessment of learners' language ability should, to a large extent, focus on the ways in which and the effectiveness with which learners can perform relevant target language use tasks.

3.   Tasks put to different uses

Since the first publications on TBLT in the 1980s, where basic principles were laid out (e.g., Long, 1985; Prabhu, 1987), tasks have been put to different uses in the fields of applied linguistics and second language education. Researchers, administrators, syllabus designers, test developers and assessment centers, teacher trainers, teachers and students have responded to the literature, research, and presentations about TBLT, and have, each in their own preferred ways, tried to integrate tasks in their work. Along with these different users and uses, however, came a wide variety of different interpretations of task-based language teaching as a methodology and of its basic unit "task", giving some observers the impression that almost anything, from an information gap activity to a fill-the-gap grammar exercise in which the student is asked to add an -s (where appropriate) to a list of isolated verb forms, can be called a "task". Such confusion, however, issues at least partly from a lack of attention by critics to the distinctions made within TBLT between the generic meaning of the word "task" versus the essential features of task as a basic unit in task-based research and education.

3.1   Tasks in SLA research

Since the 1980s, second language researchers have used communication tasks—that is, tasks which prioritize the exchange of information about meaningful content in order to accomplish some kind of communicative goal—in a multitude of studies, most of which were led by the ambition to elaborate the existing knowledge base on how second language acquisition comes about, and what variables influence or determine its rate