

TAKING THE CRITICS TO TASK: THE CASE FOR TASK-BASED TEACHING

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Abstract

All form-focused language instruction involves an attempt to intervene in the process of learning a second language (L2). Instruction as intervention is of two basic kinds – direct and indirect. Direct intervention involves providing learners with explicit information about the target of the instruction together with opportunities to practice the target (i.e. explicit instruction). It invites intentional language learning on the part of the learner. Indirect intervention involves setting up opportunities for learners to learn without specifying what the target of the instruction is (i.e. implicit instruction). In other words, there is no explicit teaching of the target feature although there are opportunities to engage in the use of it. Implicit instruction caters to incidental language learning on the part of the learner. These two types of intervention assume different positions regarding the interface between explicit and implicit knowledge of a second language (i.e. a non-interface, a strong interface, and a weak interface position). This talk will consider these interface positions through an examination of recent research that has investigated the effects of explicit and implicit instruction on second language acquisition.

1 Introduction

Task-based language teaching has received support from both teacher educators (e.g. Willis, 1996) and from second language acquisition (SLA) researchers (e.g. Long, 2014; Skehan, 2011; Ellis, 2003). It has also been subjected to considerable criticism (e.g. Sheen, 1994; Swan, 2005). One of the problems of these criticisms is that assumes that there is a single method called ‘task-based language teaching’ and ignores the fact that TBLT is not a well-defined ‘method’ but rather a general ‘approach’ to teaching languages (Richards & Rogers, 2001). I will start therefore by pointing out some of the key differences in proposals that have emanated from both teacher educators and SLA researchers.

2 Differences in approach to task-based language teaching

A basic distinction can be made between task-based and task-supported language teaching. The former requires a syllabus where the content is specified entirely in terms of the tasks to be performed (i.e. the tasks serve as the basis for an entire language curriculum). 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 (see below). However, rather than serving as stand-alone activities, they fit into the ‘production’ phase of a traditional present-practice-produce (PPP) methodology, serving as an ‘add-on to an otherwise synthetic syllabus. Task-supported teaching certainly has its advocates (Müller-Hartman & Schocker van Ditfurth, 2011). It should be noted, however, that this distinction is not a watertight one. This is because some proponents of task-based

teaching advocate the pre-teaching of language in the pre-task phase of a lesson which results in a type of task-supported language teaching, especially if the linguistic items to be taught are drawn from an *a priori* grammatical syllabus.

In Table 1 I distinguish different versions of TBLT in terms of a number of key characteristics:

1. Natural language use

All four versions see tasks as creating contexts for the natural use of language (i.e. where language is treated as a tool rather than as an object for study and where, therefore, meaning rather than linguistic form is primary). This is arguably the one unifying characteristic of all the versions. In this way, TBLT caters to incidental rather than intentional language learning.

2. Type of task

Tasks can be classified in a number of ways but two are of particular importance and clearly distinguish different approaches. First, following Nunan (1989), tasks can be ‘real-world’ or ‘pedagogic’. Real-world tasks aim at both situational and interactional authenticity in that they mirror the actual tasks that learners may have to perform in real life (e.g. ordering a meal in a restaurant). Pedagogic-tasks aim only at interactional authenticity (i.e. they do not correspond to real life events but still generate natural language use). Spot-the-difference is a classic example of a pedagogic task. Willis and Long both emphasize real-world production tasks. Long (2014) sees conducting a needs analysis as an essential preliminary step for developing a task-based syllabus. In contrast, all of Skehan’s tasks (see Skehan, 2011) have been pedagogic in nature. The second distinction concerns whether the task is designed to elicit production from the learners or only requires them to process input. Skehan clearly favours production tasks. However, Ellis (2001) argued that input-based tasks have an important role to play in TBLT.

3. Linguistic focus

Tasks can be unfocused or focused. An unfocused task has not been designed with any particular linguistic focus in mind although, as Skehan (1998) points, out it likely that any task will invite the use of a limited ‘cluster’ of linguistic features. A focused task has been designed to create a context for a pre-determined linguistic feature – for example, a specific grammatical structure or a set of vocabulary items. Focused tasks are required for task-supported language teaching but can also figure in task-based language teaching, the difference being that in the former learners perform the task knowing what the focus is whereas in the latter they do not and thus are more likely to engage with the target feature in natural language use. Both Long and Ellis see a role for both unfocused and focused tasks. In contrast, Willis and Skehan appear to prefer only unfocused tasks.

4. Linguistic support refers to the teaching of ‘useful’ language for performing the task in the pre-task phase of a lesson. This can involve both grammar and vocabulary but, by and large, advocates of TBLT prefer linguistic support to be directed at useful vocabulary for performing a task whereas proponents of task-supported teaching

focus on grammar. Neither Long nor Skehan view linguistic support as a desirable feature of TBLT. In contrast, Willis considers it desirable and Ellis see it as optional.

5. Focus on form

Focus on form is defined as the pedagogic strategies for attracting attention to form while learners are primarily focused on meaning as they perform the task. SLA researchers such as Long, Skehan and Ellis see focus on form as an essential element in TBLT. In contrast, a common pedagogic position, reflected in Willis (1996), is that no attempt should be made to focus learners' attention on form during the performance of the main task on the grounds that this will detract from 'fluency'. One of the main ways of achieving a focus on form is through corrective feedback.

6. Learner-centredness

TBLT is generally seen as a learner-centred way of teaching language as it emphasizes the performance of tasks in pair- or group-work. A brief look at both the pedagogic and research literature reveals how central small group-work is to TBLT. This is reflected in the general positions of Willis, Long and Skehan, all of whom view tasks as instruments for generating talk between learners. Ellis, however, has taken a different stance, arguing that tasks can also be implemented in teacher-class interaction. Indeed, in the case of input-based tasks they need to be. He considers a teacher-class participatory structure as the ideal way for introducing TBLT in contexts where both teachers and students are not familiar with it.

7. Rejection of traditional approaches

By 'traditional approach' I refer to both grammar-translation and to presentation-practice-production. There is always a tendency when a 'new' approach appears on the horizon to present it as an alternative to older, established approaches. This has certainly been the case with TBLT, with Willis, Long and Skehan all offering arguments for abandoning traditional approaches. Ellis has taken a different stance, recognizing that older approaches may be well-adjusted to the contexts in which they are used and also demonstrably effective in promoting learning. His position is to propose a modular curriculum consisting of both a synthetic component (as in traditional approaches) and an analytic component (as in TBLT). Ellis (2002) outlined how such a modular approach might be designed for students of different proficiency levels.

Table 1. Differences in four versions of TBLT

Characteristic	Willis (1996)	Long (1985; 1991; 2014)	Skehan (1998; 2011)	Ellis (2003)
Natural language use	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Type of task	Real-world production tasks	Real-world production tasks	Pedagogic production tasks	Both pedagogic and real-world input-based and production tasks.
Linguistic focus	Primarily	Both unfocused	Only unfocused	Both focused

	unfocused tasks	and focused tasks	tasks	and unfocused tasks
Linguistic support	Yes	No	No	Possibly
Focus on form	In the pre-task and post-task phases but not in the main task phase	In the main-task phase	Mainly in the pre-task phase	In all phases of a lesson
Learner-centredness	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not necessarily
Rejection of traditional approaches	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

3 Misconceptions about task-based language teaching

I will now turn to consider some common misconceptions about TBLT (see also Ellis, 2009; 2012). As will become clear many of these misconceptions originate in the mistaken belief that there is a single, uniform approach called ‘TBLT’.

3.1 ‘Task’ is an ill-defined construct

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). He seizes on the definition provided by Skehan (1998):

- 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 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.

The problems Widdowson pinpoints lie in part in the nature of Skehan’s definition. Elsewhere (Ellis, 2009a), I have argued that my own definition does provide a basis for distinguishing a ‘task’ from an ‘exercise’. I identify four key characteristics 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.

In many respects, the key criterion is (3). An ‘exercise’ involves text-manipulation of some kind (e.g. filling in gaps in sentences; performing a scripted dialogue; substituting words in a model sentence/ dialogue). In contrast, a ‘task’ involves text-creation (i.e. learners have to use whatever means they have to process input or to create their own utterances in order to achieve the outcome of the task). Text-creation involves decoding or encoding messages that have both semantic and pragmatic meaning. It is motivated by the need to close the ‘gap’ by supplying relevant information or by expressing an opinion about some issue. The ‘goal’ of a task is to achieve a communicative outcome; the ‘goal’ of an exercise is to display correct use of the target feature. The ‘real world relationship’ that Skehan refers to does not mean that a task must have situational authenticity, as Widdowson seems to assume, but that it should result in the kind of language behaviour found in the real world (i.e. it must have interactional authenticity). The linguistic resources that learners draw on to achieve the outcome of a task may or may not be ‘minimal’ depending on the nature of the task and the learners’ level of proficiency.

Seedhouse (2005) critiques ‘task’ as a construct on different grounds. He argues that it is impossible to predict the ‘activity’ that results from the performance of a ‘task’ and therefore tasks cannot serve as units for planning a language course. In part he is right. Sociocultural theorists have made a similar point and shown that the same ‘task’ performed by different people – or even the same person at different times – can result in very different kinds of ‘activity’ (Coughlan & Duff, 1994). However, Seedhouse overstates his case. Tasks can be designed and implemented in ways that make the nature of the activity predictable, at least to a degree, as Skehan’s own research has shown (see Skehan, 2001). One might ask, however, whether it matters if the language use emanating from a task is not entirely predictable. It only matters if the intention is to use tasks to teach a structural syllabus – as in task-supported language teaching. If the aim is to create contexts for natural language and incidental acquisition, then, arguably, prediction is not necessary.

3.2 Indexical and minimal use of the L2

Seedhouse (1999) was also critical of task-based language teaching on the grounds that the performance of tasks results in indexicalized and pidginized language because learners are over-reliant on context and thus do not need to stretch their linguistic resources. Widdowson (2003) made a similar point, claiming that learners may be successful in achieving the communicative outcome of a task without any need to attend to their actual use of the L2. Seedhouse (1999) provided the following example of the kind of impoverished interactions that he claimed result from the performance of tasks. In this example the students were required to complete and label a geometric figure:

- L1: What?
- L2: Stop.
- L3: Dot?
- L4: Dot?
- L5: Point?
- L6: Dot?
- LL: Point, point, yeh.
- L1: Point?
- L5: Small point.
- L3: Dot

(From Lynch 1989, p. 124; cited in Seedhouse 1999).

Clearly a task can result in language consisting of single words and formulaic chunks - especially if learners are beginners as they were in Seedhouse's example. However, there is also plenty of evidence to show that tasks can rise to much more complex and accurate use of the L2. Much depends on the nature of the task and the way it is implemented. Opinion-gap tasks can elicit more complex language use than information-gap tasks (Rulon & McCreary, 1986). Giving opportunities to plan before they perform the task also has a notable effect on the complexity – and in some cases accuracy - of the language used (see Ellis, 2009b). Thus the claim that tasks will inevitably result in impoverished learner output is unjustified. Much of the research on tasks has been directed at identifying the design features and implementation options that will attract learners' attention to form.

3.3 Task-based language teaching is not suited to beginner-level learners

This critique derives from the assumption that TBLT involves only the use of speaking (or writing) tasks and that learners cannot be expected to speak in an L2 until they have acquired some resources in the language. Thus, it is claimed (e.g. Littlewood, 2007) that learners need to be taught some language before they can take part in a task.

This critique only has some legitimacy but only if TBLT is equated with the use of production tasks. In Table 1 we saw that, in fact, many of the versions of TBLT do assume that 'task' means a 'production task'. However, as Table 1 also shows, Ellis argued that this is not a necessary feature of TBLT and that input-based tasks also have a place. Shintani (2012, 2015) showed that input-based tasks can be used very effectively with beginner level learners. She experimented in using TBLT with 6-7 year old Japanese children who were complete beginners. The tasks she developed required the learners to listen to commands and display their understanding by selecting cards that matched her instructions. What was interesting about her study was that although there was no requirement that learners speak in English, over time the children did begin to do so in order to negotiate their understanding of the teacher's commands. Her study provides clear evidence that TBLT is possible even with beginner learners.

The use of input-based tasks provides a way of introducing learners to the L2 in much the same way as they learned their L1. In L1 acquisition, 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. Asking beginner learners to try to speak from the start is unnatural and can be anxiety-provoking – even if their production is carefully scaffolded as in presentation-practice-production (PPP). It should be noted, however, that input-tasks do not prohibit learners from speaking so those beginner learners who are natural risk-takers and are keen to speak as well as listen are free to do so.

3.4 There is no grammar in task-based language teaching

Sheen (2003) 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'. He 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. In a similar vein, Swan (2005) insisted that TBLT 'outlaws' the grammar syllabus.

In fact, in one way or another there is plenty of grammar in TBLT. First, even though there is no grammatical syllabus, there is the possibility of designing focused tasks to address specific

grammatical problems that learners demonstrate they have. Of the different versions of TBLT summarized in Table 1, only Skehan claims that tasks should be of the unfocused kind. Focused tasks aim to create a context in which the use of a specific grammatical structure is ‘natural’, ‘useful’ or ‘necessary’ in order to achieve the outcome of the task (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993).

Attention to grammar can be achieved in all the phases of task-based lesson. Guided pre-task planning allows learners the opportunity to consider what grammar they will need before they start to perform the task. In the main-task phase, a focus-on-form (Long, 1991) can be achieved in various ways. There is now a wealth of research (see Ellis & Shintani, 2013) to show that the corrective feedback learners receive while they are performing a task not only helps to draw their attention to specific grammatical forms but also facilitates acquisition. Swain and her co-researchers (e.g. Swain & Lapkin, 1995) have shown that when learners perform a focused task in pairs or small groups ‘language related-episodes’ occur frequently and that these are often successfully resolved and contribute to learning. Finally, in the post-task phase, there is an opportunity to focus explicitly on a grammatical form and provide practice in using it correctly.

Perhaps this misunderstanding – that there is no grammar in TBLT – originates in Willis’ version of TBLT. Willis did reject focusing on form during the main task phase, arguing that to do so would interfere with fluency. However, all the other versions of TBLT see attention to grammatical accuracy as a desirable and even a necessary feature of task performance. TBLT is not just directed at developing communicative skills; it is also a means for developing linguistic (including grammatical competence).

In short, there is plenty of ‘grammar’ in TBLT. What is missing, however, is the explicit teaching of grammar. TBLT is predicated on the theoretical claim that grammar is best learned in flight while learners are struggling to communicate as in this way learners discover the grammatical forms that they need for the specific meanings that they are attempting to understand or express.

3.5 TBLT is an entirely learner-centred approach

Given that ‘learner-centredness’ is generally viewed as desirable in language pedagogy it seems somewhat strange to find that some critics of TBLT object to its learner-centredness. However, to an extent, I am sympathetic to this critique. Swan (2005) complained that ‘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). Swan bases this claim on the fact that TBLT is 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).

There are some obvious advantages of group as Long & Porter (1985) pointed out:

- Group work increases language production opportunities.
- Group work improved the quality of student talk
- Group work helps individualize instruction
- Group work promotes a positive affective climate
- Group work motivates learners.

and it is strongly recommended in teacher guides (e.g. Ur, 1996; Hedge, 2000).

However, the claim that TBLT requires the performance of tasks in groups is mistaken. It has probably arisen from the fact that much of the research that has investigated tasks has investigated speaking tasks which learners perform in pairs or in groups. In fact, group work is not an essential characteristic of TBLT. Prabhu (1987), for example, argued that effective task-based teaching needs to expose learners to good models of the L2 and argued that this requires that the teacher take charge of the task in a whole-class context. Input-based tasks such as those used in Shintani's study actually require a teacher-class participatory structure; the teacher provides the input in these tasks and the learners respond non-verbally to demonstrate that they have understood. Even 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 all the students.

Nor is the teacher just a 'manager and facilitator of communicative activity'. The teacher serves as a major source of input in TBLT. Shintani used the metaphor of 'navigator' to describe how the teacher skilfully assisted the students to understand the commands in her listen-and-do tasks. Other studies (e.g. Lyster, 2004) have shown that the teacher has a major role to play in providing corrective feedback while students are performing a task. At times, as in Samuda's (2001) account of the 'things-in-pocket' task, the teacher may need to step outside the task to provide some brief explicit instruction in order to guide learners to make the link between a grammatical form and its meaning. In fact, in TBLT, the teacher needs to perform multiple roles in TBLT.

TBLT does cater to learner-centredness - group work is clearly desirable - but it also requires that the teacher is active in ensuring that a task is performed in ways that will foster learning and, at times, this will require teacher behaviour more closely associated with teacher-centred teaching.

3.6 Tasks must be performed entirely in the L2

A further common misunderstanding is that TBLT requires both the teacher and students to perform tasks only in the L2 and to outlaw the use of the L1. This has been seen as problematic. Carless (2004) reported that elementary level students in Hong Kong experienced difficulty in speaking in English (the L2) when they performed tasks and for this reason argued that TBLT was not suited to learners with limited L2 proficiency.

In fact, though TBLT does prohibit use of the L1. Sociocultural theorists have argued that the L1 can serve as a mediating tool for performing tasks in the L2. Anton and DiCamilla (1998) reported that the university students they investigated made effective use of their L1 (English) to solve linguistic problems that arose during group work when completing a writing task in the L2 (Spanish). From this perspective use of the L1 can serve to scaffold production in the L2. Thus while TBLT aims to provide contexts for the meaningful use of the L2, recognition is given to the desirability of students sometimes drawing on their L1 resources. 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 even presenting grammar points (Cook, 2001). It acknowledges the naturalness of code-switching when there is a shared L1 (Macaro, 2001).

Teachers, however, do expect that learners will use the L2 in TBLT as much as possible. In some contexts, this expectancy is also found in students. Shintani (2011) found that when her beginner level learners performed a task for the first time, they naturally drew on their L1 but that over time as the task was repeated and the children grew familiar with both the procedures and the English needed to perform the task, they began to increasingly use English. Shintani's

study suggests two important principles that can inform the use of the L2 in TBLT. First, teachers should start with input-based tasks that make minimal demands on learners' need to speak in the L2. In other words, this ensures that while the input is mainly in the L2, learner output can initially be in the L1. Second, repeating a task will develop both the confidence and language that learners need to perform it in the L2.

There are also ways in which learners can be helped to use the L2 in task-based group work. One way is to allow opportunity for pre-task planning. If learners have the opportunity to plan before they speak they are more likely to try to use the L2 when they start the task. In pre-task planning learners may well draw on their L1 to help them both conceptualize what they want to say and to formulate how they will say it in the L2. It will help to give them confidence to speak in the L2. There is now a wealth of research that shows that pre-task planning enhances the fluency and complexity (and sometimes also the accuracy) of learner production in the L2 (Ellis, 2009b).

3.7 TBLT is not suited to 'acquisition-poor' environments

Swan (2005) claimed that TBLT is not suited to 'acquisition-poor' environments by which he meant foreign-language contexts where learners are dependent on the classroom for learning a language. He argued that in such contexts, learners need a more structured approach to ensure the grammatical resources needed for communicating. However, while grammar is certainly helpful for communicating, it is not essential. Research on early L2 acquisition both outside the classroom (e.g. Klein & Perdue, 1997) and inside (e.g. Ellis, 1984) has shown that learners manage to communicate with no or very minimal grammar. They draw on a limited range of formulaic expressions and vocabulary in conjunction with context to say what they want to say. Grammar, in fact, comes later, driven by the need to express more complex ideas that require more complex language. This well-attested feature of L2 acquisition led to me to propose a modular curriculum based on tasks in the initial stage with the kind of structured approach that Swan favours delayed until students have developed a basic ability to communicate (Ellis, 2003b). In other words, as shown in Table 1, I do not see TBLT as replacing more traditional forms of language teaching but being used alongside it in a complete curriculum.

Nevertheless, Swan's critique is reflected in the argument I often hear from teachers in countries such as China, Korea and Japan – namely, that there is not sufficient teaching time to ensure that learners learn all the grammatical structures in the syllabus if they adopt a task-based approach and that, for this reason, it is necessary to rely on explicit grammar teaching. It might be possible to wed a task-based approach to a structural syllabus by means of focused tasks. This was the approach that Takashima (2000) adopted in Japan. However, I remain doubtful of such a solution. It leads to a task-supported rather than a task-based approach with the risk that the focus remains primarily on form rather than on message-making when such tasks are performed. Also, as Loschky and Bley-Vroman (1993) pointed out it is very difficult to design focused tasks that make the use of a pre-determined grammatical feature 'essential' rather than just 'natural' or 'useful'. The fundamental problem remains, namely the assumption that teaching needs to be based on a grammatical syllabus. In effect, this is likely to lead to prioritizing explicit knowledge and accuracy over implicit knowledge and fluency. The solution lies in acknowledging that if the aim is to develop the interactional competence and confidence required for using an L2 in communication, this cannot be achieved through a complete reliance on a grammatical syllabus. Countless students in East Asian countries who have experienced such an approach have failed to achieve any ability to communicate in an L2 even after six years of instruction.

Ultimately, the issue is what the goal of the language programme should be and how this goal can be best achieved.

3.8 TBLT is promoted on the basis of theory only

Swan (2005) coined the phrase ‘legislation by hypothesis’ to refer to what he saw as an attempt by SLA researchers to foist TBLT on the language teaching profession. By this, he meant that researchers have staked out the case for TBLT on the basis of some untested theoretical premises and, in fact, there is no evidence to suggest that TBLT is more effective than more traditional approaches such as PPP. Sheen (1994, 2003) presented similar arguments. He emphasized the need for comparative method studies that investigated the relative effectiveness of TBLT and more established methods.

In fact, Swan and Sheen are incorrect in claiming that there is no empirical evidence to support the theoretical underpinnings of TBLT. One of the key hypotheses that Swan objects to is the Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 2001). This claims that for learning to take place learners need to pay conscious attention to exemplars of linguistic features as these occur in the input they are exposed to. It is this hypothesis that underlies the importance that TBLT attaches to ‘focus on form as a means of attracting learners’ attention to features in the input. There is no ample research to show that ‘noticing’ does go on both when learners perform tasks in small groups and, perhaps even more so, when they perform them with the teacher.

Swan and Sheen have a point, though; advocates of TBLT do need to provide evidence that TBLT is more effective than traditional methods (e.g. PPP) and so it is clearly important to conduct studies that compare the effects of these different approaches on L2 learning. There have in fact been relatively few such studies, in part because of the problems associated with comparative method studies (see Ellis, 2012). Sheen (2006) attempted such a study. He compared the effects of focus-on-form (involving TBLT with corrective feedback) and focus-on-forms (involving PPP) on the acquisition of question forms and adverb placement by French grade six elementary students. The results he reported were clearly in favour of the FonFS. However, the design of the study clearly favoured the FonFs group as there was no attempt to ensure that the target features were systematically attended to in the FonF group. In other words, the task-based instruction was not implemented in accordance with the need to ensure a focus on form when it was implemented - a key feature of TBLT.

Two studies that focused on vocabulary reported results in favour of TBLT. In de la Fuente (2006) the TBLT students (elementary learners of L2 Spanish) completed a restaurant task in pairs where they needed to negotiate the meaning of the target words to complete the task (i.e. ordering food). The PPP learners received 50 minutes instruction consisting of explanation of the new words (presentation), controlled oral and written production exercises (practice) and a role play performed in pairs (free production). No difference in vocabulary learning was evident in an immediate post-test showed but in a delayed test completed one week after the instruction, the learners in the TBLT group outperformed those in the PPP group. In other words, TBLT resulted in more durable learning. Shintani (2011) compared TBLT involving input-based tasks and PPP. She found no difference between the two groups in the case a set of target nouns but a clear superiority for the TBLT group for adjectives. Both of these studies also investigated the process features of the two types of instruction, demonstrating clear differences. In the TBLT classes there was evidence of a focus on the target items when comprehension failed and the learners negotiated for meaning. This did occur only rarely in the PPP classes.

Shintani (2015) also looked at the effects of the same two types of instruction on the incidental acquisition of plural –s. This feature was not directly taught to either the PPP or TBLT groups but opportunities for their incidental acquisition occurred through exposure to it in the classroom interactions. The main findings were that incidental acquisition of plural-s occurred in the TBLT class but not in the PPP class. Shintani argued that this was because only the task-based instruction created a functional need to attend to the structures.

There is still too little evidence to satisfy the doubts of Swan and Sheen but the research to date suggests that TBLT, when properly implemented, holds advantages for both adult and child learners and that these are evident for both vocabulary and grammar.

4 Conclusion

In addressing these misconceptions about TBLT, I do not wish to suggest that there are not some very real problems in implementing TBLT in instructional contexts in Asia. These problems can be grouped according to whether they concern the teacher, the students or structural issues within the education system. It is important to note, however, that many of these problems will be found no matter what approach to teaching is adopted.

4.1 Problems involving teachers

1. The teachers limited proficiency in the L2 and, in particular, their lack of confidence in speaking in the L2.
2. TBLT requires teachers to abandon their traditional roles as ‘knower’ and ‘transmitter of knowledge’ and to take on the roles of ‘participant’ and ‘co-learner’. This has led some commentators (e.g. Samimy & Kobayashi, 2004) to claim that TBLT imposes western educational values on systems that are not culturally-suited to them.
3. Teachers are often not clear of what constitutes a ‘task’ and are unable to make a clear distinction between a ‘task’ and an ‘exercise’.
4. Teachers experience problems in managing task-based lessons in large classes, especially when the students work in small groups (Carless, 2004).

4.2 Problems originating in students

Many of the problems involving students are perceived rather than real. For example, a common perception among teachers is that TBLT is not possible with students who possess limited communicative abilities. As I have already pointed out, this can be addressed through the use of input-based tasks which provide a foundation for later speaking. A more real problem is how students orientate to learning an L2 in the classroom. If they are accustomed to treating language as an object rather than as a tool, they may fail to see the point of performing tasks that cater to incidental rather than intentional language learning.

4.3 Structural problems

The greatest impediment to the introduction of TBLT is a number of structural problems in educational systems that teachers are largely powerless to change. Two problems in particular make TBLT problematic for teachers:

1. Teachers may be required to teach to a syllabus that specifies what is to be learned in terms of lists of words and grammatical structures. As a result they prefer to base their teaching directly on the items listed in the syllabus rather than on tasks that have only an indirect relationship to the linguistic content of the syllabus.
2. Many Asian countries that have mandated the use of TBLT continue to assess learning by means of indirect, system-referenced tests (Baker, 1989) that measure learners' linguistic accuracy in ways that encourage the use of explicit rather than implicit L2 knowledge. As a result, teachers feel the need to focus on accuracy and encourage students to develop an explicit understanding of grammatical rules. This leads to resistance to using tasks.

These are all problems that will need to be addressed if TBLT is to be used effectively (see Ellis, 2009a, for some suggestions). One solution might be to 'adapt' TBLT to the local context by substituting task-supported teaching. Littlewood (2007), for example, proposed that learners should be inducted into performing tasks by means of activities that lead them from traditional form-focused exercises through activities of an increasingly communicative nature. But this is likely to result in a return to traditional methodology of the present-practise-produce (PPP) kind. A better solution is to set about addressing the problems that teachers and learners face in implementing it and to work at convincing educational authorities to make the structural changes needed. For both motivational and proficiency reasons, TBLT remains the best hope if the educational goal is that of achieving real communicative ability in learners.

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