

## **Applicability Issues with TBLT in EFL Contexts**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the theoretical rationales and practical aspects of task-based language teaching (TBLT) with particular reference to research findings in EFL/ESL contexts. The definitional scope of the term 'task', polarizations in terms of task vs. non-task, and its relation to different language teaching approaches have engendered conceptual and methodological ambiguities. Moreover, factors related to task difficulty and task procedures have been rarely examined empirically. The adoption of the approach has faced serious resistance due to the incompatibility of some of its underpinnings with the nonwestern cultures of learning, the long-held psychometric traditions of testing, and its claims about communication and task accomplishment as conducive to language acquisition. The unpredictability of the learners' reactions during communication, disregard for the teachers' sense of plausibility and learners' level have created tension amongst teachers, learners, and authorities as to the suitability of this approach. It is argued that the ideological stance of the approach needs to be tampered with greater realism thorough accountability reports and evidential research.

**Keywords:** *TBLT, task appraisal, task implementation, teacher/learner*

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### **1. Introduction**

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an analytic syllabus and is assumed to be potential because of its claims for being based on what is currently known about the processes involved in second language learning, findings of classroom research, and the principles of course design for the teaching of languages for specific purposes (Crookes & Gass, 1993). It began in the early eighties because of frustrations created by the limitations of the PPP model (presentation, practice, and production) further encouraged by the success of Prabhu's (1987) Communicational Teaching Project, and supported by recent research findings in the field of SLA.

TBLT assumes that second language acquisition is the result of the same process of interaction as first language acquisition (Wells, 1985). Meaning

rather than form is primary. Attention to language form occurs incidentally by making learners 'notice' their linguistic deficiencies in pre and post-task stages. Unlike the PPP cycle, the focus on language form comes at the end (Willis, 1996). The communication task itself is central to the curriculum as both necessary and sufficient, i.e. task transaction is adequate to drive forward language development. There is a clear pedagogic relationship to out-of-class language use. Task completion gains priority, and task assessment is in terms of outcome. (Long, 1985; Long & Crookes, 1993; Prabhu, 1987; Schmidt, 2001; Skehan, 1996; Wesch & Skehan, 2002).

Basically, there are two justifications for tasks as the basic building blocks for communication and acquisition. A 'communicative/real-world rationale' treats classroom activity as a rehearsal for actual communicative behavior in the outside world (Nunan, 1991). Further, a 'psycholinguistic rationale' assumes that there are inherent properties in a task that predispose or orient learners to engage in certain types of language use and mental processing that are beneficial to acquisition (Ellis, 2003b). These task variables determine how effectively learners communicate and how they acquire language.

## **2. Terminological, conceptual, and methodological ambiguities in relation to tasks**

The term task is not new and has a broad pedagogical and non-pedagogical ring to it. It dates back to the vocational training practices of the 1950s which involved little communication or collaboration (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The current definitions of task range from very general to completely specific making a clear-cut definition an uphill task. They range along a cline of assumptions which do not entail communicative purpose to those which involve communicative purpose to only those activities which involve communication (Barton, 2002; Littlewood, 2004). For example, Williams and Burden (1997) define task as "any activity learners engage to further the process of learning a language" (p. 168). Similarly, Breen (1987) defines task as any range of learning activities "from simple and brief exercises to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision making" (p. 23). Communicative purpose is not an essential criterion whatsoever in these broad definitions. Similarly, Long (1985), taking a non-technical perspective, defines task as the hundred and one things people do in everyday life for themselves or for others, freely or for some reward the completion of which may sometimes not involve language use whatsoever. Thus, painting a wall would be an instance of task here where no language is actually used. This definition is certainly not a pedagogical one. Other researchers' definitions conceive of tasks as communicative exercises which "provide opportunities for relatively realistic language use focusing the learners' attention on a task, problem, activity or topic, and not on a particular language point" (Stern, 1992, pp.195-196). This definition refers to

task as an activity that involves some communication. Yet, other researchers argue “tasks are *always* activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome” (Willis, 1996, p. 23, italics are mine for emphasis). This statement defines task exclusively in terms of only activities that involve communication. If an activity does not have a communicative purpose, it is called ‘exercise’ (Ellis, 2000). Nonetheless, task vs. exercise/non-task distinctions is also limiting. That is, the status of the range of activities between task and exercise, like information-gap tasks which have proven very helpful for contextualizing language items (Doughty & Pica, 1986; Pica, 2005), is yet unknown for many teachers and thus a source of ambiguity.

The various definitions and interpretations of task extends the term to limitless boundaries for its operation and, as Littlewood (2004) argues, this implies that “the concept itself has no limits and therefore little meaning” (p. 321). These overextended definitions for task as the central unit of practice in TBLT raises doubts about the validity and applicability of the term to the extent that some researchers question whether talking about CLT or TBLT makes any sense at all (Celce-Murcia, 1997; Widdowson, 2000). With this broad definitional scope, it is not clear how TBLT can achieve its purpose on the ground, which is bridging the gap between classroom practice and outside classroom reality. It can only remind teachers of the fact that the goal of language instruction is to develop the learner’s communicative competence.

TBLT if seen as a development from the communicative approach, given that the term is fraught with ambiguities and will not arouse enthusiasm outside the language teaching circles, suffers from the same problems of communicative approach. The whole gamut of task definitions from non-communicative to communicative to exclusively communicative is counter-productive. Thus, some valid arguments for a more flexible definition of task-based teaching like ‘communicative-oriented language teaching’ (Littlewood, 2004), or ‘task-supported language teaching’ (Ellis, 2003b) seem to be quite in place.

Moreover, not every teacher conceives the nature, scope, and purpose of task in the same way, a conceptual ambiguity. Ascribing the term to both content-driven approaches (with pre-selected, pre-sequenced syllabi), and method-driven pedagogy (e.g., task-based pedagogy where learners are presented with a set of general learning objectives, problem-solving tasks, and not a list of specific linguistic items) is yet another source of ambiguity. Secondly, the description of tasks versus language teaching approaches (language-centered, learner-centered, and learning-centered) misleads readers to conclude that tasks fall neatly into the above-mentioned three categories of language teaching approaches (Kumaravadivelu, 1993), and this leads to methodological ambiguity. This is certainly not the case since classroom procedures are an amalgamation of grammar exercises, communicative activities, negotiation and expression of meaning.

It is a ‘fine judgment’ to assert that a task has a real-world relationship but as long as the concept itself is not well-clarified, many claims based on it would not be productive for language teaching and learning purposes.

### **3. Operationalization issues**

Operationalization issues deal with task difficulty and sequencing, task classification, and task-based performance assessment.

Research into learners’ performance on tasks essentially identifies task complexity (attentional and reasoning demands imposed by task structure), task difficulty (learner-related factors), and methodological procedures (e.g., task planning/repetition) as determining factors on learners’ performance (Ellis, 2003a). This research has come up with the following highlights:

1. Task performance is a function of a competition among fluency, complexity and accuracy (Bygate, 1999; Skehan & Foster, 1999).
2. Task difficulty is a function of the learners’ lack of familiarity with task types, confusion over task purpose, and impact and extent of cultural knowledge upon task completion (Mc Donough & Chaikitmongkohl, 2007; Nunan and Ken, 1995).
3. Cognitive complexity of tasks affects language production and learner perception of task difficulty (Robinson, 2001).
4. Sequencing has significant effects on the accuracy and fluency of speaker production, but may have no effect on the amount of interaction (Robinson, 2001).
5. No single, general measure of task performance can be used to determine whether one task is more complex than another. A task may be difficult in terms linguistic accuracy but relatively easy in terms of fluency (Skehan, 1996).

Notwithstanding these scant empirical findings, task difficulty is a concept that is not easy to specify because of a host of relevant unconfirmed issues involved (Honeyfield, 1993; Richards & Rogers, 2001). These issues relate to procedures (e.g., how to derive output from input); output required in terms of vocabulary, discourse structure, genre, skills, topic knowledge, conversation strategies; amount and type of support given, the role of teachers and learners, time constraints and communicative pressure, learning styles, learner level, etc. What researchers generally do is they mainly present the various factors above taxonomically as currently little is known about how they interrelate to affect performance. Nonetheless, these taxonomic expansions have not been seriously examined to allow for establishing the relevant weight of each index of difficulty, thus making operationalization of task difficulty and complexity an unaccomplished mission.

We can even find contradictions in the few suggestions made in this area. For example, Skehan (2001) proposes that dialogic tasks lead to greater accuracy and complexity, and monologic tasks fluency, while Robinson (2001) proposes the opposite. This signifies uncertainty with reference to



many of the proposed criteria of task complexity. We do not have firm evidence to argue, for instance, that optional dialogic tasks are more or less difficult than required monologic tasks, and consequently what cumulative effect they can have on accuracy, complexity, and fluency.

As for sequencing, it is imperative that tasks are sequenceable on some principled criterion to reflect what attentional resources they require so that they lead to maximum learning. Primarily, this requires consideration of formal features (syntactic and lexical difficulty), content (cognitive complexity), and communicative pressure (communicative stress, time pressure, etc.). An effective balance and prioritization then is required between these features and learner characteristics. Unfortunately, little empirical and operational research is yet available for these various proposed parameters and it seems not within reach in the near future (Ellis, 2000). Thus, so far task sequencing has proceeded intuitively based on the designer's experience about learners' reactions to different tasks (Ellis, 2003a; Mc Donough & Chaikitmongkohl, 2007). Accordingly, Widdowson (2000) criticizes task-based syllabi for failing, like linguistic syllabi, to formulate grading criteria that can be modeled on the sequence of language acquisition. Ellis (2003a), however, contends this view by stating that tasks do not need to be graded with the same level of precision as linguistic content. The problem is that lack of precision and clarity in stating the relation of the core task with a pre-task may cause inadequate learner preparation, then minimal pupil participation in the core stage, and abandoning of a task and thus switching to a different activity (Littlewood, 2004).

As for task types, researchers have proposed different task-based classifications. For instance, Nunan (1991) distinguishes real-world tasks (useful for outside classroom) and pedagogical tasks (which may not necessarily reflect real-world tasks). Other tasks are grouped according to themes (Norris, Brown, Hudson, and Yoshioka, 1998). Themes like planning a vacation with tasks like booking a flight, choosing a hotel, etc. Yet, others group tasks into categories such as listing, comparing, etc. (Willis, 1996). Finally, we notice task classifications according to the type of interaction that occurs in task performance like jigsaw tasks, information-gap tasks, problem-solving tasks, etc. There are still other classifications like divergent/convergent, competitive/collaborative, single/multiple, concrete/abstract, etc. All this raises serious problems about the finiteness of the tasks, i.e. how many tasks and task types are there, how many levels of analysis, and where one task ends and another one begins. More importantly, it is hard to realize how much more such theme-based classifications or categories offer beyond the intuitive impressions of the supporters of situational language teaching of the 1960s or the impressionistic taxonomies of Munby's communicative syllabus design (Richards & Rogers, 2001). Finally, it is not clear how we can define and classify these tasks when the

activity that arises from a task could not be easily pinned down since it varies from one learner to another and also within a single learner on different occasions.

As for task-based assessment, establishing degrees of correlation between assessment tasks and real-life tasks is a fundamental concern. Real-life tasks may not always be appropriate to assess task performance in cases where it requires prior knowledge or experience on the part of the learner. The representativeness of a task in terms of content is also problematic given the ample complexity and variety of the domains of the target language use. How can we employ a systematic, controlled, and preplanned 'test genre' to elicit the best possible performance and yet expect that performance is representative of the real-world performance (Wigglesworth, 1997)? We cannot ensure that scores on tasks assessing the same outcome have the same meaning. Lack of comparability across tasks is a potential threat to the reliability and validity of task-based assessment (Brindley & Slayter, 2002). In addition, what sort of learner behaviour are we going to measure when we have little data about what constitutes an interactionally and situationally authentic task-based test, let alone the variations in the learners' perceptual, cognitive, personality and communicative style. The question of having a task-based test to be predictive of performance in specific real-world contexts is an ambitious goal given the unique socio-culturally-driven co-construction of communication between interlocutors. The questions of inconsistency in scoring and sampling of tasks as well as feasibility of such an endeavor in terms of money, time, and expertise (practicality) yet remain to be answered (Fulcher, 1997)

#### **4. Teacher and learner reactions to tasks**

Even if task characteristics and conditions were manipulated to produce the desired effect, the influence of the learner on the task can jeopardize the task-designer or teacher's goals. Any pre-selected task by the teacher will be changed by the way the learner interacts with it (Breen, 1987; Morphey, 2003). This happens due to variations in the task focus (accuracy, fluency, or both), learner familiarity with the content, and performance conditions (monologic/dialogic), all affecting any convergence or divergence between the teachers' intention and the learner's interpretation of the task.

Moreover, pedagogic discussions of tasks have paradoxically ignored the issue of learner level. The fundamental assumption in these discussions is that active learner role is an index for the taskness of a task (Littlewood, 2004). However, when low-level EFL learners are not equipped with the adequate linguistic tools to initiate or maintain the interaction, they will not be able to be active conversational partners. However, if they are pushed into interaction, they may resort to avoidance strategies, or develop pidgins (Samuda, 2001), or even get stressed out and frustrated.

Investigating learner's attitude towards TBLT is another important consideration ignored in task-based teaching. Slimani-Rolls (2005) showed that learners' perception of the task may be much more significant than its logical construction:

...learners clearly pretend to understand and accept their classmates' distorted discourse because their personal characteristics, their perception of the task and their personal circumstances vis-à-vis themselves and their classmates, none of which can possibly be predicted by the teacher,... can heavily affect the implementation of teaching sessions (p.195).

The learners in her study asserted that they perceived it as their teacher's responsibility to react to incorrect language during interaction, not their own. Similarly, beginner EFL Brazilian students in Garret and Shortall's (2002) study saw teacher-fronted grammar and fluency as better for learning than student-centered grammar. Intermediates felt quite reverse.

It seems that at initial levels, planned teacher-fronted PPP would be helpful practice. It assists weak learners especially in mixed ability classes imagine themselves in the situation. Therefore, rather than starting with tasks and procedures and attaching purposes to them, we had better start from level of the learners and the purposes we wish to gain, and then select appropriate classroom tasks to meet those purposes (Bruton 2002).

Teacher's setting of task goals may be implicit or explicit, and there may be a conflict between teachers' and learners' goals. For example, when the task is asking a persons' job and whether he likes it, the teachers' goal may be to develop learners' interpersonal skills, peer feedback, etc., but students may only think about a quick performance of the task to satisfy teacher's requirements.

Furthermore, teachers have somewhat ambivalent perceptions towards the applicability of this approach for schooling (Carless, 2003) because it goes against much of their pedagogic intuitions and thus treat it with great caution. This feeling is compounded by their fears that students might make excessive or off-task use of the mother tongue during pair or group work (Lee, 2005).

Teacher spontaneity is another major challenge in task-based courses because he must be ready to provide the unpredictable help that will be required if task completion and interaction are the driving force in class, something to which EFL teachers may not be accustomed. "This presupposes a broader type of readiness for almost anything to occur, compared to the more comfortable ability to prepare for the pre-ordained structure-of-the-day" (Skehan, 2003, p. 11). This view is actually instantiated in the few studies done on the initial inconvenience this approach poses for teachers (Carless, 2003; Mc Donough & Chaikitmongkohl, 2007). Teachers with their profound background in traditional instruction argue that leaving focus on form or grammar instruction to the post task phase would not be feasible since the

interest or concentration of the students may wane and thus not acquire the new linguistic forms. In Carless's (2007) study teachers did not make any mention of a systematic post-task focus on form. The teachers are likely to be sufficiently aware of the constraints inherent in their situation to be skeptical of the value of state-of-the-art methods which seem to them clearly inappropriate to the circumstances in which they work (Swan, 2005).

The purpose of this discussion is not to denigrate the value of TBLT for developing the students' independence and communication strategies. Contrarily, it seems imperative that teachers situate CLT into their language teaching programs in the first place before adopting it. Such an adjustment requires consulting with learners seeking their ideas about language learning and their roles in the learning process. For the teachers, this may involve workshops to introduce the principles and philosophy of task-based language teaching as well as teaching guides about learning strategies, objectives, the amount of materials and activities, and time per lesson (Mc Donough & Chaikitmongkohl, 2007).

### **5. Implementation and suitability problems**

The adoption of a task-based approach has raised concerns from not only teachers but from school authorities and families. Mesky (1983) demonstrated a high degree of task-based stress among teachers in eastern Kentucky associated with management practices including actions over which teachers had little control, and events associated with student discipline. Task-based activities may give rise to management problems and loss of control. Noise or discipline problems are not considered acceptable within the structures of primary or secondary schooling especially in large mixed-ability classes. The stated priority of completing the assigned textbook is another threat to task-based courses. Coverage is a means of institutional power and dominance over teachers and students (Benesch, 1999), leaving little time for learners to relate their daily lives and learning practices. Task-based activities are often interpreted as time-consuming and not so easy to fit into the teaching schedule. We argue that there is definitely some validity to the teachers' skepticism towards TBLT. In effect, Beretta's (1990) 'macro-evaluation' of the Communicational Teaching Project in India showed that around 75 percent of the teachers could not really adopt or assimilate into TBLT and could not really understand the merit of the approach.

Task-based instruction (TBI) is viewed as impractical in foreign language teaching contexts because of limited class time available for teaching the L2. Normally, in Asian contexts the English class hour ranges from two to four hours a week, and this time limit is too short for any significant task-based interaction on other skills and practices. Furthermore, TBI is seen as difficult to implement by non-native speaking teachers whose L2 oral proficiency is uncertain. To gain approval among teachers and practitioners, TBLT needs to deal with these problems by being sensitive to

the sociocultural constraints and by inviting a critical response from the learners through the collaborative efforts of teachers and learners (Ellis, 2003a).

The cross-sectional research on the theory or practice of task-based pedagogy has involved some short intervention times of two to three weeks. This casts serious doubt on the validity of their findings for longer classroom practice, and may not really make sufficient connection with most classroom decision making. There is also a paucity of longitudinal research into the feasibility of pre-task or post-task planning through the entire course. In that respect, one can go beyond applications of focused studies, and identify other 'units' which concern the teaching sequences for an entire class (not just five minutes of pre/post task work) or for the whole extension of the course. Therefore, the applicability of research on task stages for language teachers' decision-making is yet very limited and requires tremendous empirical support.

#### **6. The role of examinations**

A key issue affecting the implementational prospect of task-based approach is the extent of synergy between examinations and the kind of activities carried out in task-based courses. In test-dominated contexts, beliefs about the role of internal and statewide assessment clearly play an important role in the pedagogies that teachers are willing to attempt. Chinese teacher respondents in Carless' (2007) study all stated that examinations act as a barrier towards the implementation of task-based practice. Shim and Baik (2004, p. 246) also report on how teachers in South Korea are "caught between government recommendations on the one hand and the demands of students and parents for a more examination-oriented classroom instruction on the other". The internal exams are very much modeled on the weighting systems and methodologies of the external or high-stakes state-run exams. In the present researchers' context, for instance, the use of multiple-choice vocabulary, grammar and reading exams on both the national entrance exam to university and other non-governmental institutions is quite a norm. Exactly the same case seems to happen in Japan (Butler & Iino, 2005; Samimy & Kobayashi 2004) where students and teachers are less inclined to focus on communicative aspects of English because of the nature of the university entrance exam. No wonder there would be a huge investment on the part of the teachers and administrators to teach to the test. Some initial steps taken to stimulate changes through modifying the content or format of high-stakes tests as a strategy in some parts of the world has revealed that wash back effect is complex and often works relatively slowly simply because internal examinations lag behind external examination developments, (Carless, 2007; Cheng, 2005).

## 7. Sociocultural barriers to TBLT

Questions have been raised about whether the communicative approach is appropriate in nonwestern countries where cultures of learning are different. Some cultures are more interested in knowledge accumulation than using knowledge for immediate purposes (Hue, 2005). For instance, the Confucian culture dominating China focusing on traditional norms makes TBLT not favorable for teachers (Carless, 2007). This view conflicts with values of a learner-centered task-based approach. Samimy and Kobayashi (2004) refer to the Japanese learning culture which is more mimetic, teacher-oriented and thus in conflict with task-based approach which focuses more on meaning than form, process than content, and different communicative styles. Consequently, administrators and teachers need to be aware of imposing demanding or uneasy methodologies on learners.

Students' ideological stance towards communication in English is another concern in adopting a task-based pedagogy. Reda (2000) reports on the attitude and motivation of the Korean students in a university English class. The attitude was "Koreans don't have to speak English, so they were being Koreans by not speaking English." (p.25). Placing too much emphasis on oracy is not favored in some cultures. Canagarajah (1999) reported Sri Lankan students' resistance to cooperate with the teacher through whispering, passing notes, or writing some notes in the margins of their textbooks. It seems that communicative techniques and TBLT are not favored in the eastern cultures where collectivist culture pushes them towards interdependent group membership and age and gender roles rather than towards their individual selves. However, in a western culture independent voicing of judgment, displaying knowledge, and giving opinion are favored. These do not match the status-driven systems in nonwestern cultures where hierarchical relations and traditions between teachers, learners, and authorities are deeply ingrained, and redefining them will pose threats because it requires modifying the role traditionally and conventionally assigned to them.

## 8. TBLT and language pedagogy

### 8.1. *Is task-based pedagogy superior?*

In TBI, the accomplishment of the task is the focus rather than the language used (Willis, 1990). However, the actual purpose of the task performance is not really the outcome but enhancing the learners' interlanguage, cognition, and personality (Littlewood, 2004). The extent to which task completion contributes to the learners' cognitive and personality development and has wider educational values beyond the language classroom is a missing point in discussions on 'good tasks' (Abdollahzadeh, 2008). Moreover, on many occasions task completion may not necessarily involve language use. Students are not in a language class to finish a task but

rather to improve their language. Thus, “proponents of task-based L2 instruction may need to reconsider completion as a criterion of a language task, since it may not be given high priority by teachers or students in the classroom” (Springer & Collins, 2008, p.56).

In addition, task-based supporters argue that what tasks actually produce is interaction between participants and this interaction makes the input comprehensible thus leading to acquisition (Long, 1985). Theoretically, it sounds quite rosy. However, it is really hard for EFL learners especially the low-level underachievers to basically initiate, maintain or terminate interactions, and even if they do, it would be a very narrow and lop-sided one. They definitely will not be able to hold conversations that lead to learning unless they are fed through some formal instruction and teacher intervention. It is apparent that the most basic structures are needed all the time as learners struggle to talk about themselves, their experiences and so on. It is a big claim to assert that participation in interaction per se leads to acquisition

Attention to language form occurs incidentally through helping learners ‘notice’ the form in interactions. This hypothesis rejects any formal teaching of language and grammar and thus discredits the PPP models. No doubt, some form will be learnt, at least partially, from exposure to input or during communicative activities. However, studies on incidental learning of form show very small learning gains (Laufer, 2006). Since EFL learners need to learn a foreign language in much less time, there is no escape from supplementing oral and written input with some planned form-focused instruction (Pica, 2005). Consequently, a well-planned traditional structural syllabus is an expression of a needs analysis before a holistic approach in TBL. As Swan (2005, p.394) argues “traditional structure grading is informed by pedagogic experience and expertise: future research is unlikely, for example, to stop us teaching present tenses before subjunctives”.

Incorporating a linguistic focus into TBLT is a major problem. Ellis (2003b) refers to two ways of obviating this problem through either an ‘integrated approach’ (using content-obligatory or content-compatible linguistic forms from the school curriculum) or a ‘modular approach’ (similar to proportional approach). The problem with these approaches is that they go against the learnability problem. That is, learners may not be developmentally ready to process the linguistic forms that have been targeted for acquisition (De Keyser, 1997; Williams & Evans, 1998). Moreover, it is difficult to see how in many exposure-poor foreign language classrooms with time constraints, poor teaching, unsuitable materials or unsatisfactory syllabus design, interaction can reliably promote the acquisition of new material during task performance unless the teacher provides the learners with some essential basic forms to survive especially at elementary levels. Further, the claim goes against research that learners typically bypass communication problems during tasks with little or no negotiation of form or

language development, and that successful transfer of knowledge in such a context depends on a host of factors, and the knowledge transferred is not always correct (Foster 1998).

Each new method may break from the old one but at the same time it takes the positive aspects of the previous paradigm (Brown, 1994). A rejection of the PPP model in TBLT is indeed counterproductive to many researchers and practitioners (Johnson, 1996). This does not necessarily mean a staunch support for PPP models. After all, the best method is not necessarily the state-of-the art one, but one that is derived from a principled basis of understanding resulting from a rapprochement between two poles of possibilities that will best fit ones' global theory of teaching and learning on the one hand and his local context on the other. L2 pedagogy in the future will most likely be eclectic to cater for all learning styles, strike a balance between scientific appropriateness and the local constraints of time and cost efficiency, and, most importantly, merge both form and meaning (Leaver & Willis, 2005).

Accordingly, there is a real need for more realism and flexibility in task-based approach. Teachers themselves are much more aware of the constraints of their contexts. In Carless's (2007) study teachers and educators argued for completing some units through traditional teaching and some through a task-based approach. In addition, some teacher educators argued for variation in terms of suitability for different ability levels. They saw task-based approaches as being more productive with higher achieving students and believed that lower achieving students would need more support before or during tasks. This in fact means adaptation in the sense of flexibility and variations tailored to suit local teachers and learners.

### *8.2. Strong or Weak form?*

Task-based instruction is a strong version of communicative language teaching and rests on the assumption that learners discover the system of the language as they communicate (Howatt, 1984), not the other way round. The 'weak version' involves the communicative practice of language items introduced in a traditional way. The strong version considers improving students' abilities to use the target language as superior to acquiring new linguistic skills (Samuda, 2001). Task transaction and focus on meaning is adequate to drive forward language development (Skehan, 1996) and everything else is subsidiary. It is supposed to give greater opportunity than weak variations for student choice of language. Although some language skills can be learned through focus on meaning, there is increasing evidence that the learning is incomplete and that grammatical development is imprecise (Laufer, 2006; Pica, 2005; Swain, 1985). The current situation of task-based teaching is complex as the weak forms of CLT are influenced by research that supports accuracy and less fluency, while the strong forms have revealed their inability to promote levels of accuracy matching their success



in the development of fluency (Wesche & Skehan, 2002). Thus, there may be a need for their complementarity, and the need to tailor situations for particular CLT contexts both to the learner's characteristics and to their given language objectives. The existence of different variations of TBLT can be useful in offering flexibility but also potentially problematic in terms of being confusing or even contradictory. Nonetheless, explicitness of a strong tenable rationale for task-based instruction is a matter of huge controversy as it draws on very different theories, which oftentimes stand in contrast to each other. A closer inspection of most so-called 'task-based' courses reveals that they are 'task-supported' not 'task-based', i.e. 'task' has generally been used not as the 'central unit' of the course but as a methodological device for implementing the linguistically organized courses (Ellis, 2003a). Accordingly, a strong 'task-based framework' has much less chance of being adopted than a weaker 'task supported' version.

#### **9. TBI and language acquisition**

In TBLT, Language acquisition takes place principally and exclusively through communication, and second-language acquisition happens exclusively in incidental 'noticing' of forms during communicative activity (Schmidt 2001). The problem with this hypothesis is that not all the particular forms and exemplars come up during interaction, particularly in the case of exceptions and marked structures. Further, not every form is an equal candidate for drawing attention (Williams and Evans, 1998). For instance, passives are more complex than participial adjectives in terms of both form and use (De Keyser, 1995). More importantly, how is this attention to form operationalized? Is drawing the attention enough for learners at different proficiency levels? The learners must be developmentally ready for any particular form instruction. The effectiveness of noticing is function of the instructional treatment, form type, and learner profile, none of which has been adequately investigated in TBI. This claim depends largely on explanations from work in areas which are not firmly connected to classroom context. There have been many people who have learnt languages successfully through 'traditional' methods, something incompatible with the hypothesis.

Moreover, how new language knowledge is acquired is not explained clearly in TBI. TBI is a method-driven approach in which no attempt is made to specify what the learners will learn, only how they will learn. As Swan (2005) argues:

It seems to be commonly taken for granted that structures and lexis will be made available for learning (and presumably learnt) through interaction, task materials, 'focus on form', teacher intervention, pre-teaching, or simply the rich input felt to be associated with task-based interaction; but these assumptions are not for the most part given detailed attention or subjected to testing" (p. 389).

How new language knowledge is developed, particularly if the pre-task stage is, as Willis (1996) suggests, a short stage comprising mainly 'Introducing the topic' and 'Identifying topic language', and only 'during-task stage' is obligatory (Ellis, 2003b). It is assumed that 'pushed output' in which learners refine their communicative knowledge through clarification requests, comprehension checks, etc. promotes acquisition. However, these features can lead to L2 development only if provided in a focused and consistent manner to developmentally ready learners (Revesz, 2007). Moreover, there is too much 'minimality' and 'indexicality' in task-based interactions (e.g., constructions without verbal elements) to the extent that teachers and researchers find it immensely impoverished, segmented, and 'esoteric' (Seedhouse, 1999). Task-based interactions provide learners with substantially less new language than 'traditional' approaches and this is a serious problem (Swan 2005). What tasks actually produce is 'speaking for the sake of speaking' and task completion rather than an urgent need for genuine meaning exchange and effective language acquisition, more so because the range of interactions and modifications are highly constrained by the nature of the task itself. There are serious concerns about whether the amount of language generated by the tasks justify the large amount of time spent on them. Research has shown that students do not exploit their full language resources but only the minimum language explicitly required by the task (Lee, 2005; Carless, 2004). There is definitely more to language acquisition than exclusive learner-fronted interaction. Many communication activities used in CLT may meet the information gap-filling requirement but not the genuine need requirement (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2006).

As for negotiation of meaning as a primary focus in TBI, we find pitfalls with the consequences of putting such an emphasis on meaning. When learners place great emphasis on meaning, they will not worry about the exact form that they use and lose sight of it. This problem is compounded when learners are under the pressure of time and the need to get the meaning across, a typical feature of timed tasks. It is probable that the result would be a lexicalized or pidginized communication that may create pressure for immediate communication than interlanguage change and growth. Moreover, there is yet little research to testify any direct relationship between negotiation of meaning and restructuring of the learners' grammar in SLA (Pica, 1996).

Indeed, task-based interaction can constitute a "particularly narrow and restricted variety of communication" (Seedhouse 1999, p.155). Furthermore, as Swan (2005) argues, "if one was seeking an efficient way of improving one's elementary command of a foreign language, sustained conversation and linguistic speculation with other elementary learners would scarcely be one's first choice" (p. 390).

TBI claims that instructing learners to use particular structures renders tasks so unnatural that they are "of dubious value for acquisition" (Skehan,

1998, p. 130). However, the less predictable the communication in the task, the less any chance of preparation for it, and thus the greater the likelihood of learner error and language avoidance (Samuda, 2001). This naturalistic communication-driven approach can be extremely unsuitable for exposure-poor contexts particularly in foreign language teaching contexts with intensive programs and thus suffers serious limitations. This approach towards language acquisition is seen as being too close to L1 processes to be applicable in EFL contexts (Klapper, 2003). Pre-task planning on the use of communication strategies may not promote communication if the learners cannot scaffold each other adequately thus relegating the task to the level of exercise thus subverting the naturalistic claims of task-based approach. Fundamentally, comparing L1 to L2 is a comparative fallacy due to lack or weakness of access to UG, and the replacement of the domain-specific knowledge with the general problem solving in adult language learning. Knowledge of UG is incomplete and incidental and depends on the learners' ability to reconstruct a UG surrogate (Bley-Vroman, 1989). As a result, there is partial success and considerable variation.

#### **10. Summary and conclusion**

In this article, we tried to shed light on the terminological, conceptual and methodological ambiguities the concept of 'task' creates for language teachers and practitioners. Moreover, factors related to task difficulty and task procedures are hard to diagnose for effective sequencing and performance assessment, and rarely examined empirically. There have been calls for a different sequencing and weighting frameworks for task-based approaches (Robinson, 2001; Willis, 1996). Achieving this goal, however, requires resolving many issues. That is, the notion of task difficulty along with ambiguities in the definition and sampling of tasks, generalizations across tasks, task types and classifications, make task-based performance assessment a tremendously difficult undertaking.

TBLT, motivated primarily by a learning than a language theory (Richards & Rogers, 2001), has offered tremendous challenges to language teachers, learners, and school authorities in EFL contexts. The adoption of the approach has proven difficult due to theoretical, socio-cultural, and implementational problems. It requires teachers, as the main change agents, abandon their previous experiences and 'catapults' them into a low profile role without concern for what they know about the conditions which facilitate efficient language learning and teaching. There is certainly a sense of credibility to teachers' subjective conceptualization of how learning takes place and how teaching causes or leads to learning. The behaviouristic psychometric examination systems also push teachers and families not to adopt the approach. Thus, unless teachers' sense of plausibility (Prabhu, 1990) is respected and examination systems are revised, the approach will face serious resistance on the ground.

The proportion of concrete examples and empirical research showing the effectiveness of TBLT over other approaches is scant. The research base of the approach is limited particularly due to the questionable methodology and short intervention times used. We believe Richards' (1984) caution holds true here that "If the methodology of language teaching is to move beyond the domain of speculation and dogma, its practitioners must become more seriously concerned with the issues of accountability and evaluation than its recent history has evidenced" (p. 24).

Theoretically speaking, seven of Willis's (1996) purposes for task-based instruction relate primarily to communicative effectiveness and only one relates specifically to L2 acquisition (i.e. giving learners the chance to benefit from 'noticing' how others express similar meanings). This reflects the approach's bias towards improving students' abilities to use the target language communicatively rather than at enabling them to acquire new linguistic skills (Samuda, 2001). Nonetheless, communicative effectiveness does not guarantee language acquisition. As Ellis (2000) states:

...it cannot be assumed that achieving communicative effectiveness in the performance of a task will set up the interactive conditions that promote L2 acquisition. Students may succeed in performing a task successfully without the need to participate in much meaning negotiation. (p. 212)

The psycholinguistic rationale of TBLT assumes that there are inherent properties in a task that determine how effectively learners communicate and how they acquire language. But, effectiveness of communication is determined not only by the nature of the task but also by learner factors, such as personality and cognitive style, and teacher preferences. The same task might result in very different kinds of activity depending on the role that the teacher plays. Task-based teaching fails to demonstrate a direct relationship between task-design variables and L2 acquisition and teaching. Its naturalistic claims ignore findings of research from linguistic theories (White, 1991), and learnability. The 'rehearsal rationale' states that task-based learning "should directly reflect what learners potentially or actually need to do in the target language" (Nunan, 1991, p. 282). This view focusing on teaching language as communication is an ideological stance. There is no guarantee that tasks create communicative contexts that foster language acquisition or the communicative competence of the learners. It is highly probable that communication pressure forces EFL learners to develop some avoidance strategies to bypass communication and lose the opportunity to focus on forms that may arise incidentally during each lesson to stretch their interlanguage linguistically. Further, we can never be sure that classroom tasks we choose will successfully simulate the kinds of communicative acts that learners will experience in real-life contexts since tasks require students and teachers act as language users (rather than learners) and treat language as tool (rather than an object). Assuming the role of language user in highly

communicative contexts is not easily achievable in a language classroom (Springer & Collins, 2008). The fundamental contribution of the language classroom continues to be focus on language in meaningful exchanges. Making the above dual application of tasks in EFL language classrooms is difficult since real-world tasks are more distant especially for younger learners (Cameron, 1997).

The theory of task-based learning is that tasks stretch, challenge and push the linguistic knowledge of the learners to the limit. However, what we often find in practice is more or less the opposite process, with the learners demonstrating such a minimum and impoverished display of their linguistic competence that resembles a pidgin. Pidginized language production, learners' avoidance strategies, and task-bound minimal demand on learner competence cast serious doubt on the conduciveness of task-based interaction to language acquisition.

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