Task-Based Learning: A Research-Based Approach

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Abstract

　Task-Based Learning（TBL）アプローチは、1980 年代中頃に Communicative Language Teaching（CLT）アプローチから発展し、言語習得への効果的な学習法として支持されている。これまでの数十年、その有効性、明示的文法に焦点を当てた指導の必要性、及びその学習法の意義について多くの議論が為されてきた。

　本稿では、TBL アプローチの発展過程を約説すると共に、多数存在するタスクベースの教育手法の例を、理論的根拠を挙げながらそれぞれ定義及び比較することにより、全ての教育者へ採用を奨励するものである。

1. Introduction

Task-Based Learning (TBL) is "an approach to language teaching in which learners must complete activities which aim to simulate real-world communicative problem solving, and in which attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form" (Cook, 2003, p. 131). TBL is synonymous with Task-Based Instruction (TBI), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Task-Based Approaches (TBA) and Task-Based Syllabi (TBS).

TBL has been promoted as an effective approach to language teaching, with supporters drawing on a variety of findings from SLA research (Robinson, 2011, p. 1). It developed out of pedagogic proposals for a greater emphasis on communicative activities in language teaching and is thus descended from the communicative language teaching (CLT) and natural approaches popular in the 1970s and 1980s (Cook, 2003, p. 37). The British linguist Allwright and his Indian counterpart Prabhu theorized that language could be learnt incidentally, whilst focusing on meaning during the completion of tasks involving a problem-solving element (Prabhu, 1987). Prabhu's 'Bangalore Project' was an experiment in implicit TBL which departed radically from mainstream grammar-translation and PPP (presentation-practice-production) explicit teaching methods and generated much interest.

The mid-1980s saw calls for "tasks" to form the "units" of syllabus design, supplanting more traditional linguistic units such as grammar, functional phrases or vocabulary (Robinson,

2011, p. 5).　Shortly after, Candlin (1987, cited in Robinson, 2011, p. 6) pointed out the necessity for tasks to be evaluated, selected and sequenced in a principled fashion, and much SLA research is still concerned with the best way to do this.

Concurrent developments in transformational-generative grammar showed that the internal grammatical system in fluent speakers operates subconsciously, and it was suggested that this system is too complex and inaccessible to consciousness to be fully accounted for by linguists, or adequately incorporated into any grammatical syllabus (Prabhu, 1987, p. 17). Krashen's (1985) influential 'Input Hypothesis' recognized two processes operating during language development: subconscious acquisition and conscious learning.　He argued that traditional form-focused instruction that targets conscious learning does not transfer to the subconscious and is therefore ineffective.　These developments reinforced the idea that language should be acquired through a focus on meaning only, and rejections of 'outdated' traditional structural syllabi soon followed.

Influence from the communicative language teaching (CLT) movement led Long (1988) to propose a non-interventionists approach which also rejected a systematic role for grammar instruction. His proposal differed from Krashen's by providing attention to form incidentally when justified by communicative need.　He labelled this approach 'focus on form' (FonF), while the traditional teaching of discrete grammar points in separate lessons he labelled 'focus on formS' (FonFS).　Evidence from immersion programs, in which participants, despite years of rich and meaningful input, continued to produce non-target-like language, suggested that input and focus on meaning alone was insufficient for SLA (Carter & Nunan, 2001, p. 154).　The debate over the necessity of discrete grammar instruction lead to the emergence of 'strong' and 'weak' forms of TBL (Skehan, 2003, p. 1).　The weak form views tasks as an adjunct to structure-based teaching, whereas the strong form views tasks as the *method* of acquisition and argues that communicative interaction alone is sufficient (Nunan, 2004, p. 114).

Most researchers working on task-based research accept the FonF generalization, whether from Long's interactionist perspective, or from more cognitive approaches (Sheen, 2003, p. 2).　Ellis (2009, p. 225) insists that "the only characteristic common among all task-based approaches is the inclusion of a focus on form".

2. Defining TBL

Misunderstandings about TBL result when critics view the approach as monolithic, whereas in fact there is considerable variation (Ellis, 2009, p. 225). For Ellis "multiple versions of task-based teaching exist" (p. 221), but all have the following features:

1. The focus should be on 'meaning'.
2. There should be some kind of 'gap' (information, opinion, or meaning).
3. Learners must rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic).
4. There is a clearly defined outcome.

Willis (1996, p. 23-24) similarly defines tasks as "activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome", using whatever language forms they wish, in a meaningful way. Swan (2005, p. 377), in a critical review of TBL, provides the following list of characteristics:

1. Learning involves natural language and focus on meaning over form.
2. Learner-centeredness is promoted.
3. Intervention is only as necessary.
4. Student attention is drawn to forms as they arise.
5. Communicative tasks enable interaction.
6. Pre- and post-task stages may be beneficial to prime 'noticing' of forms.
7. 'Traditional' (FonFS) approaches are dismissed as ineffective.

Swan, Ellis and Willis are in broad agreement, except on point 7. The crux of Swan's argument against TBLT is that it dismisses FonFS, which is his preferred approach. Krashen and Long rejected FonFS in the 1980s, but a dismissal of 'traditional' approaches is not a prerequisite for TBL.

Table 1 compares three modern interpretations of TBLT described in Ellis (2009). A rejection of traditional approaches is a feature of Long's and Skehan's approaches but not of Ellis', and a FonF is an integral part of all three. Therefore, labelling TBL a 'no grammar syllabus' (Sheen, 2003) is incorrect. All three approaches utilize unfocused tasks (where learners can use any linguistic resource at their disposal). When a particular form can be

predicted to occur during communication, focused tasks (requiring a particular structure to complete) are an option in Ellis' and Long's approaches.

Ellis (2009 p. 224) also distinguishes between 'task-based' and 'task-supported' language teaching. 'Task-supported' teaching is a less radical diversion from traditional methods, utilizing a structural syllabus involving PPP. On the other hand, a 'task-based' lesson can involve three parts (pre-task, main-task, and post-task) during either of which a FonF can be introduced.

Characteristic	Long (1985)	Skehan (1988)	Ellis (2003)
Natural language use	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Learner-centeredness	Yes	Yes	Not necessarily
Focus on form	**Yes** - through corrective feedback	**Yes** - mainly through pre-task	**Yes** - in all phases of TBLT lesson
Tasks	**Yes - unfocused** and focused	**Yes - unfocused**	**Yes - unfocused** and focused
Rejection of traditional approaches	Yes	Yes	No

Table 1. Approaches to TBLT (from Ellis, 2009).

3. Theoretical Foundations

Support for TBL comes from a number of theoretical perspectives (Table 2). Shehadeh and Coombe (2010) explain that tasks provide opportunities for negotiating meaning, modifying input, and focusing on form (The Input Perspective). They provide opportunities for learners to modify their output to make it more comprehensible (The Output Perspective). Meaning-focused tasks can promote fluency and accuracy, while more form-focused tasks can develop complexity of target language (TL) (The Cognitive Perspective). 'Scaffolding' and jointly performed tasks enable learners to "collaboratively construct knowledge which engages learners in cognitive processes that are implicated in L2 learning" (p. 3) (The Sociocultural Perspective). Brainstorming, pair- and group-work, student-student and teacher-student interaction, and students taking more responsibility for their own learning are also aspects of TBL that facilitate SLA (Student Autonomy and Student-Centered Instruction Perspective).

TBLT draws on three theories from SLA research (Ellis, 2009, p. 240): the online hypothesis, the noticing hypothesis, and the teachability hypothesis.

3.1 The On-Line Hypothesis

The on-line hypothesis proposes that learners attend to form when they are primarily focused on meaning during communication. Swan (2005, p. 379) claims this hypothesis is based on extrapolation from work in areas far removed from classroom SLA, e.g. working memory research, and that it is undermined by the experiences of learners who have acquired a second language successfully by 'traditional' methods. He points out that it is possible to learn about grammar before the rule has been naturalistically acquired. Ellis (2009, p. 239) counters that the hypothesis has been proven in numerous studies, and that learners attend to grammatical features in recasts provided they are developmentally ready.

Theoretical Perspective	Explanation
Input Perspective	Interaction provides learners with feedback at their level of comprehension and this 'comprehensible input' (Krashen, 1985) enables 'negotiation of meaning' and 'noticing' of form (Long, 1988) necessary for SLA.
Output Perspective	Output enables learners to test hypotheses about the target language (TL), and to 'notice the gap' between what they can and want to say.
Cognitive Perspective	Learner performance has three aspects: fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Fluency and accuracy can be promoted through meaning-oriented tasks. Development of TL requires complexity, which can be promoted through form-focused tasks.
Sociocultural Perspective	Vygotskian theory says social interaction mediates learning. Jointly performed tasks enable learners to solve problems beyond their individual linguistic abilities (Swain & Lapkin, 1998, cited in Shehadeh & Coombe, 2010, p. 3).
Student Autonomy & Student-Centered Instruction Perspective	Empirical evidence suggests that internal attention-drawing devices are more effective than external attention-drawing techniques (Izumi, 2002, cited in Shehadeh & Coombe, 2010, p. 4).

Table 2. Theoretical perspectives supporting TBLT (from Shehadeh & Coombe, 2010).

3.2 The Noticing Hypothesis

The noticing hypothesis states that learners 'notice the gap' between their interlanguage (IL) ability and the TL when there is a problem with comprehension or production. Once noticed, knowledge of the linguistic element is acquired through unconscious induction.

Swan (2005, p. 380) states this hypothesis is "pedagogically benign … originating in Schmidt's relatively informal analysis of his experience of learning Portuguese (Schmidt and Frota, 1986) … and it seems unlikely … that everything language learners acquire can derive from conscious noticing". However, studies show learners do repair their errors following corrective feedback, indicating they have noticed the correct form (Sheen, 2004, cited in Ellis, 2009, p. 239).

3.3 The Teachability Hypothesis

The teachability hypothesis states that learners can only acquire features for which they are developmentally ready. Swan (2005, p. 381) claims there is a lack of empirical evidence for this hypothesis. He points out that if pre-planned structure teaching is ineffective when learners are not developmentally ready, why would opportunistic focus on form during TBL be any different? It is a good question, but multiple studies have demonstrated that development stages cannot be skipped or subverted by instruction (Pica, 1983 & Ellis, 1989, cited in Ellis, 2009, p. 239; Lightbown, 1983 & Pienemann, 1984, 1989, cited in Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 376-377).

4. Effectiveness of TBL

Prabhu's 'Bangalore Project' is one of the few published classroom experiments into TBL.   It was independently evaluated by Beretta & Davies, using structural classes as the 'control'. They reported that "the experimental groups significantly outperformed control groups" (Beretta & Davies, 1985, p. 126). Therefore, the TBL groups had "acquired both some grammar and the capacity to utilize their linguistic knowledge communicatively" while focusing on meaning (Ellis, 2009, p. 238).

Numerous laboratory studies into TBL have been published.   Psycholinguistics has dominated research into the value of FonF. Recently, this has been challenged by the 'sociocultural theory' (Lantoff, 2000, cited in Nunan, 2004, p. 115), based on the theories of the Russian psychologist Vygotsky. Additionally, cognitive researchers have investigated the psychological processes active during task completion (Skehan, 2003 p. 5).

4.1 Psycholinguistic research

Psycholinguistic research is heavily influenced by the role of interaction and the negotiation of meaning. Long (1983, 1989) suggested that the way learners modify their language when dealing with communication difficulties delivers personalized positive and negative feedback at the moment when the learner is most receptive. Long (1989) proposed that such negotiation of meaning is achieved through a greater number of clarification checks and requests between the interlocutors, and that convergent tasks (where the goal is agreement on an answer) provide the best opportunity for negotiation. Duff (1986, cited in Skehan, 2003, p. 4) found weak support for this.

Recent research has shifted from the negotiation of meaning between learners, to *recasts*, or the rephrasing of a learner's utterance by an instructor to provide model language and feedback. Several studies are summarized by Nicholas, Lightbown and Spada (2001, cited in Skehan, 2003, p. 4) which suggest recasts are effective in changing some areas of learner language in the short-term, and that they are more effective when a learner has already begun to use those language features. Skehan (2003, p. 5) cites Shehadeh (2001) and Williams (2001) in relation to naturally occurring, learner-initiated recasts, where learners realized their error and corrected themselves because they were already aware of the language feature. Both of these studies suggest a greater likelihood of uptake when self-correction occurs.

Critics have claimed that tasks which require a lot of negotiation of meaning annoy learners (Aston, 1986, cited in Skehan, 2003, p. 5) and interfere with acquisition, and that lab-based studies do not reflect the frequency of negotiation of meaning in classrooms (Foster, 1998, Lyster, 1998, both cited in Skehan, 2003, p. 5).

4.2 Sociocultural research

Sociocultural research explores how learners co-construct meaning during interaction. Significantly, jointly performed tasks have been shown to enable learners to solve problems beyond their individual linguistic abilities (Swain & Lapkin, 1998, cited in Shehadeh & Coombe, 2010, p. 3).

4.3 Cognitive research

Cognitive research has shown that performance can be affected by task characteristics and task conditions (Table 3). Attention on one aspect of performance (complexity of language, fluency, accuracy) may mean that others suffer (Skehan, 1998, cited in Skehan, 2003, p. 5) though Robinson (2001, cited in Skehan, 2003, p. 5) disagrees.

Task characteristic	Influence upon performance and research basis (all cited in Skehan, 2003, pp. 5-6)
Structured tasks, i.e. clear time line or macro-structure	Clearly greater fluency, tendency towards greater accuracy (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1997, 1999).
Familiar information	Greater fluency and greater accuracy (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1997).
Outcomes requiring justifications	Justifications lead to markedly greater complexity of language (Skehan & Foster, 1997).
Interactive vs monologic tasks	Interactive tasks produce markedly more accuracy and complexity, monologic tasks more fluency (Foster & Skehan, 1996, 1999; Skehan & Foster 1997, 1999).

Table 3. Influence of task characteristics upon performance (Skehan, 2003, pp. 5-6).

An active area of research has been manipulating pre-, main- and post-task conditions. In task-based studies of learner variability, more complex and more target-like language is produced by learners when they have time to plan their output (Skehan, 2003, p. 6). However, "it is not yet clear whether performing in planned tasks subsequently helps learners to perform better in unplanned tasks" (Ellis, 2004, p. 596).

4.4 Research into task types

Ellis (2004, p. 598) admits that "little is known about how the performance elicited by different tasks affects acquisition", and that it is likely to be a long time before it will be possible to build up a multi-dimensional classification and organization of tasks in terms of their potential for second language learning. He cites numerous studies investigating the effects of task-variables on L2 interaction (Table 4). They show that negotiation of meaning is prompted by most task types. Role-play, 'authentic interaction', non-teaching, and two-way/closed tasks seem to be beneficial for a focus on language and self-repair. Problem-solving tasks have resulted in shorter turns while divergent tasks have had the opposite

effect. These kinds of classroom studies are often contradictory, and most variables "have been investigated in only one or two studies, making it difficult to reach any firm conclusions" (Ellis, 2004, p. 596). However, experimental research like this can help inform the selection and sequencing of tasks within a syllabus (Carter & Nunan, 2001, p. 154).

Study	Main results
Long (1980)	Greater NS-NNS dyad performance differences in two-way over one-way tasks.
Doughty and Pica (1986)	More negotiation of meaning in two-way tasks.
Crookes and Rulon (1985)	NS feedback following non-target-like usage more evident in two-way information gap tasks and closed/convergent tasks.
Gass and Varonis (1985)	No significant differences between the one-way and two-way information gap tasks.
Crookes and Rulon (1985)	NNS more likely to incorporate NS feedback in closed/convergent tasks than in free conversation tasks.
Tong-Fredericks (1984)	Greater self-correction in role playing and 'authentic interaction' tasks, but more turns per minute in problem-solving tasks.
Duff (1986)	Longer turns and more negotiation over meaning in divergent tasks than convergent tasks.
Berwick (1990)	More repair and negotiation of meaning in non-teaching than teaching tasks, exophoric reference more evident in experiential and anaphoric reference more evident in expository tasks, while teaching/expository tasks were "the most conservative discourse environment".
Brown (1991)	No significant differences found between tight/loose tasks, open/closed tasks, procedural/interpretative tasks.
Newton (1991)	More negotiation found on two-way/closed tasks than one-way/open tasks, a greater focus on language and task content in two-way/closed tasks, and a greater focus on opinions and meaning in one-way/open tasks.
Jones (1991)	No difference in amount of talk and turn length between role-play debate tasks and more open-ended crisis simulation tasks, though crisis simulation tasks led to more topic sequences.

Table 4. Studies of task-variables and L2 acquisition (modified from Ellis, 2004, p. 597). NS = Native speaker, NNS = Non-native speaker.

5. Conclusion

TBL is now considered a standard strategy in many language classrooms around the world (Shehadeh & Coombe, 2010, p. 4). However, Swan (2005, p. 376) argues against the "pattern of damaging ideological swings in language teaching theory and practice", i.e. against a switch from a traditional grammar-based approach (FonFS) to a meaning-based approach (FonF) characterized by TBL.

The argument that misunderstandings about TBL derive from the tendency of its critics to view the approach as monolithic (Ellis, 2009, p. 225) is the same one used by supporters of traditional teaching methods to defend FonFS: that critics "paint stereotypical pictures of straw teachers focusing only on irrelevant language features, in a rigid order, in a decontextualized and repetitious manner, with numerous tedious and meaningless exercises, where the language becomes an end in itself" (Bruton, 2000, p. 54, cited in Swan, 2005, p. 385). Generalizations like these can lead to the pedagogical swings that Swan warns against. I believe most criticism considers only 'strong' TBL, the supporters of which are far fewer than those promoting 'weak' TBL and a place for tasks in a blended syllabus. Ellis (2009, p. 221) emphasizes that "there is no single 'task-based teaching approach'", and sees traditional structural teaching as complimentary to TBL (p. 225), a position I share.

This paper has illustrated the vitality of research into TBL. The many publications and conferences devoted to TBL, and the formation in 2005 of the ICTBLT (International Consortium on Task-Based Language Teaching) also support the legitimacy of TBL as a research-based approach. However, Skehan (2003, p. 3) notes that TBL research "tends to be with adults (and some adolescents), generally at intermediate proficiency levels, and mostly with English as the target language". This is an area of TBL research that needs to be addressed.

It is my belief that TBL is an effective approach in the correct context. 'Weak' and 'strong' forms can both be appropriate depending on intended outcomes, learner variables, and preferred teaching style. Personally, I have found a 'strong' TBL approach effective teaching intermediate level learners at a Japanese university, where the primary focus was increasing fluency and confidence using English. Sheen (2003, p. 231) concludes that "different types of students fare best with different types of teaching and learning

strategies". He acknowledges that the passage from controlled ability to spontaneous oral production is a giant step, and that "frequent opportunities to practice these forms in communicative situations [is necessary] in order to render them automatic" (p. 231). This is the appeal of TBL: a focus on meaning that develops fluency and automaticity. For me, this 2000-year-old Confucian proverb captures the essence of TBL: "Tell me and I forget; teach me and I may remember; involve me and I will learn".

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