Domains and Directions in the Development of TBLT
Task-Based Language Teaching: 
Issues, Research and Practice (TBLT)
ISSN 1877-346X

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

For an overview of all books published in this series, please see http://benjamins.com/catalog/tblt

Editors

Martin Bygate  John M. Norris  Kris Van den Branden
Lancaster University  Georgetown University  KU Leuven

Volume 8

Domains and Directions in the Development of TBLT. A decade of plenaries from the international conference
Edited by Martin Bygate
Domains and Directions in the Development of TBLT

A decade of plenaries from the international conference

Edited by

Martin Bygate
Lancaster University
# Table of contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series Editors’ Preface</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authors’ biodata</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Martin Bygate</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TBLT: Building the road as we travel</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Michael H. Long</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking and acting programmatically in task-based language teaching:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essential roles for program evaluation</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>John M. Norris</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staking out the territory of technology-mediated TBLT</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Lourdes Ortega &amp; Marta González-Lloret</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Cognition Hypothesis, second language task demands, and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the SSARC model of pedagogic task sequencing</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Peter Robinson</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited Attention Capacity and Cognition: Two hypotheses regarding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>second language performance on tasks</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Peter Skehan</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasks, experiential learning, and meaning making activities:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A functional approach</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bernard Mohan, Tammy Slater, Gulbahar Beckett, &amp; Esther Tong</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linking ‘task’ and curricular thinking: An affirmation of the TBLT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>educational agenda</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Heidi Byrnes</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived benefits and challenges with the use of collaborative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tasks in EFL contexts</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Kim McDonough</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teachers evaluating tasks
  Rod Ellis

Tasks, design, and the architecture of pedagogical spaces
  Virginia Samuda

Task-based language education: From theory to practice … and back again
  Kris Van den Branden

Index
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The volume editor would like to thank the following colleagues for their invaluable help in reviewing chapters for this collection:

Rebecca Adams, Nick Andon, Rob Batstone, Roger Gilabert, Rick de Graaf, Sean Izumi, Folkert Kuiken, Shawn Loewen, Tony Lynch, Alison Mackey, Andrea Révész, Koen van Gorp, Ineke Vedder

and the organisers of all five biennial TBLT conferences since 2005: the 2005 conference in Leuven (Belgium); the 2007 conference in Hawai’i (US); the 2009 conference in Lancaster (UK); the 2011 conference in Auckland (New Zealand); and the 2013 conference in Banff (Canada).
Series Editors’ Preface

The first International Conference on Task-Based Language Teaching was hosted in 2005 at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, in Flanders, Belgium. At that time, according to conference chair Kris Van den Branden, the intent was simply to bring together teachers and researchers from around the world who were interested in sharing their ideas and experiences with TBLT—there had never been such a conference before devoted to the sole topic of TBLT, and there was no expectation that the conference would develop into a regular event. However, the response to that first event was tremendous, and it was almost inevitable that a conference series would emerge. In 2006, we (Martin Bygate, John Norris, Kris Van den Branden) agreed that a biennial conference on TBLT was a worthy goal to pursue and that a group of scholars active in the field should loosely guide the endeavor, so we formed the International Consortium on Task-Based Language Teaching. In its original form, the ICTBLT consisted of a rotating body of some 8-10 individuals from diverse backgrounds and research interests who met annually in order to select conference venues, offer advice on invited plenarists, review presentation proposals, and generally support the hosting of each new event. In the ensuing years, the International Conference on TBLT has taken place every two years in locations around the globe, hosted by institutions where TBLT research and practice is being pursued with intensity: University of Hawai‘i, USA (2007); Lancaster University, UK (2009); University of Auckland, NZ (2011); and University of Alberta, Banff, CA (2013).

Each of these conferences has featured between two and four invited plenary addresses from scholars representing a variety of perspectives on TBLT. Indeed, one of the main objectives of the conference is not only to highlight fundamental theoretical premises and practices of task-based education but also to challenge the field to think broadly in addressing the problems of language teaching in the contemporary era. Hence, plenarists have presented on a variety of theoretical orientations to TBLT (from cognitive-interactionist to pragmatic to sociocultural), on numerous high-priority research topics (from task design to teacher practice to curricular innovation), and covering a broad array of educational contexts (from second to foreign languages, face-to-face to technology-mediated environments, and very young to adult learners). In many ways, these plenary addresses serve as a robust representation of the essence and evolution of TBLT in the first decade of the twenty-first century, pointing to the deep and diverse origins of task-based educational thought while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of its application in the service of improved language teaching and learning worldwide.
In this volume, editor Martin Bygate has collected a majority of the plenary addresses that have been delivered between 2005 and 2013 at the International Conferences on TBLT. In each chapter, the authors have been encouraged to maintain the essence of their original addresses to the conference audience, while also allowing for critical updates to related issues, ideas, and research. In some cases the original plenaryist has invited colleagues whose work had been drawn on in their conference presentations to co-author the resulting chapter. The result is a formidable accumulation of reflective, considered, and cutting-edge work on key topics in TBLT. Each chapter reads as something of a watershed moment on a particular and high-priority topic, offering readers both profound observations about task-based research and practice to date as well as encouragement and guidance for future needed work.

This volume can be seen as something of a companion to the first volume in the TBLT: IRP series, *Task-based language teaching: A reader*. The chapters in this new volume provide important and critical reflections on most of the core ideas raised in that largely historical collection, as well as numerous updates and research-based extensions that help to define what might be considered the ‘modern era’ of TBLT. The timing of this volume is also intentional: the ten-year anniversary of the International Conference on TBLT is 2015, and the conference is returning once again to its origins at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. The 2015 conference will also feature the official founding of the International Association for Task-Based Language Teaching, a membership organization that is intended to sustain and perhaps expand the conference series and related outreach and development endeavors, as well as to offer support, guidance, and enhanced opportunities for the exchange of ideas as TBLT research and practice moves into the next era. We believe that this volume will play an important role in that process, and it is our sincere hope to be able to feature a similar collection on the advent of the 20th anniversary of the International Conference on TBLT.

John Norris
Kris Van Den Branden
Martin Bygate
Authors’ biodata

Dr. Gulbahar Beckett, Professor of Applied Linguistics, at Iowa State University, has published widely including on Project-Based Learning. Her current research focus on language form, meaning, and skills learning through technology enhanced projects as well as English medium instruction. Dr. Beckett is also an Associate Editor of the Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education journal (www.tandfonline.com/toc/hdim20/VACjQOtUGVg) and the Director of the Iowa State University Intensive English and Orientation Program.

Martin Bygate is Emeritus Professor, Lancaster University. His main areas of interest are task-based language learning and teaching, and oral second language development. Publications include Researching pedagogic tasks: Second language learning, teaching and testing (co-edited with Peter Skehan and Merrill Swain, Longman, 2001), and Tasks in second language learning (co-authored with Virginia Samuda, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). He has served as Co-Editor of the journal Applied Linguistics, and is a past president of AILA. With John Norris and Kris Van den Branden he co-edits the series TBLT: Issues, research and practice (John Benjamins Publishers). He was elected Fellow of the UK Academy of Social Sciences.

Heidi Byrnes is George M. Roth Distinguished Professor of German at Georgetown University. Her research focuses on adult L2 literacy acquisition at the advanced level. She has edited and coedited books and journal issues on the development of advanced literacy and the link between languaging and thinking. Recently she co-edited, with Rosa Manchón, Task-based language learning: Insights from and for L2 writing. She is a member of several editorial boards, is a past president of AAAL and the recipient of numerous professional association awards, including the Distinguished Scholarship and Service Award of AAAL. She currently serves as editor-in-chief of the Modern Language Journal.

Rod Ellis is Distinguished Professor of Applied Language Studies in the University of Auckland, and also Cheung Kong Scholar Chair Professor at Shanghai International Studies University. His published works include numerous articles and books on second language acquisition and language teaching. His most recent book is Exploring Language Pedagogy through Second Language Acquisition Research (with Natsuko Shintani) published by Routledge. He has also recently been elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand.
Marta González-Lloret is Associate Professor at the University of Hawai‘i, Manoa. She has published widely in the areas of technology and task-based language teaching, L2 pragmatic acquisition through technology, evaluation of technology-mediated language materials, and the uses of Conversation Analysis for the study of computer-mediated communications.

Michael H. Long is Professor of SLA at the University of Maryland, College Park, where he teaches courses in the Advanced Graduate Certificate, M.A. and Ph.D. in SLA programs. His recent publications include The Handbook of Second Language Acquisition (Blackwell, 2003), Second Language Needs Analysis (CUP, 2005), Problems in SLA (Erlbaum, 2007), The Handbook of Language Teaching (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), Sensitive Periods, Language Aptitude, and Ultimate L2 Attainment (John Benjamins, 2013), and Second Language Acquisition and Task-Based Language Teaching (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015).

Kim McDonough is a Professor of Applied Linguistics and Canada Research Chair in the Department of Education and the Centre for the Study of Learning and Performance at Concordia University. She previously taught at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Northern Arizona University. Her research interests include interaction and usage-based approaches to second language acquisition, structural priming, joint attention, peer interaction, and task-based language learning. She has published empirical research in applied linguistics journals including Studies in Second Language Acquisition, The Modern Language Journal, Language Learning, and TESOL Quarterly.

Bernard Mohan is Emeritus Professor, University of British Columbia and Research Fellow, King’s College London. In 1996-9, he was Chair of the International Systemic Functional Linguistics Association. He views language learning from an SFL perspective as the development of language and content learning in context. His research interests include connections between issues of experiential learning and linguistic theories of context. More generally they include theory-practice connections between functional views of language and functional approaches to education and the resulting implications for addressing educational problems.

John Norris (Ph.D. Second Language Acquisition, University of Hawai‘i) teaches and conducts research on educational assessment, program evaluation, language pedagogy (task-based language teaching in particular), and research synthesis. His work focuses primarily on language education, reflecting a lifelong interest in language learning (including German, Spanish, Portuguese, and some French, Japanese). His recent books include Student learning outcomes assessment in college foreign language programs; Improving and extending quantitative reasoning in second language research; and
Innovation and accountability in foreign language program evaluation. John has served as convener of the International Consortium on Task-Based Language Teaching since its inception (2006-2015).

Lourdes Ortega is Professor in the Department of Linguistics at Georgetown University. Her main area of research is in second language acquisition, particularly bilingual, usage-based, and educational dimensions of adult language learning in classroom settings. Her most recent book is Understanding Second Language Acquisition (revised edition in 2016, Routledge).

Peter Robinson is Professor of Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition in the Department of English, Aoyama Gakuin University, Shibuya, Tokyo, Japan. His areas of interest are attention and awareness during implicit, incidental, and explicit learning; cognitive abilities and aptitude complexes; and effects of task demands on learning and performance. He is series editor of the book series Cognitive Science and Second Language Acquisition, published by Routledge. Recent publications include the Routledge Encyclopedia of Second Language Acquisition (2013, Routledge), and Task Sequencing and Instructed Second Language Learning, with Melissa Baralt and Roger Gilabert (2014, Bloomsbury Academic).

Virginia Samuda has worked in Brazil, Singapore, the US and the UK as a language teacher, materials writer, teacher educator and researcher. Her research interests are pedagogical task design, and the role of the teacher in TBLT, and publications in this area include Designing language learning tasks: A guide (2000); ‘Guiding relationships between form and meaning during task performance: The role of the teacher’ (2001); ‘Expertise in second language pedagogic task design’ (2005). With Martin Bygate and Kris Van Den Branden, she is co-editor of TBLT as a researched pedagogy, (forthcoming).

Peter Skehan is Professorial Research Fellow at St. Mary’s University, Twickenham. Previously he taught at universities in the U.K., Hong Kong, and New Zealand. He is interested in second language acquisition, especially task-based performance and language aptitude. He has published extensively in each of these areas, such as Individual Differences in Second Language Learning (1989), A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning (1998), and a collection of his publications has appeared as Researching Tasks: Performance, Assessment, and Pedagogy,(2012). In addition, he edited a volume in the Benjamins TBLT series, Processing Perspectives on Task Performance, reporting research conducted in Hong Kong.

Tammy Slater is an Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics/TESL in the English Department at Iowa State University of Science and Technology, teaching courses in
Linguistics and Second Language Literacy, and working with pre-service ESL teachers. Her research, which draws upon analytic methods from Systemic Functional Linguistics, seeks to understand the development of academic language through content-based and project-based teaching and learning, particularly in ways that inform and advance the field of education for English language learners.

**Dr. Esther Tong** is a Principal Lecturer and Associate Division Head (Communication and Social Sciences) at the Hong Kong Community College, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She works closely with faculty members in the College to develop an adjunct model of language instruction to foster students’ academic discourse development required for successful realisation of the ways of doing and thinking in different academic disciplines. She has won several teaching performance awards, including the CPCE Dean’s Award for Outstanding Teaching Performance/Achievement in 2014/15. Her research interests lie in the areas of bilingualism, CLIL, TESL, and applied linguistics.

**Kris Van den Branden** is a teacher educator and full professor of linguistics at the Faculty of Arts of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium). At the same university he is the promotor of the Centre for Language and Education, which hosted the first International Conference on Task-based Language Teaching. He teaches and conducts research on the role of interaction in second language acquisition and teaching, the role of the teacher in TBLT, and language learning in multilingual settings. Throughout his academic career he has been committed to enhancing equity in education.
Introduction

Martin Bygate
Lancaster University

As the second ‘T’ within the acronym TBLT indicates, task-based language teaching is fundamentally concerned with education. And the letters ‘TB’ make clear that it is an approach to pedagogy in which tasks play a pivotal role in language programs, whereby the focus is on learners having to use the language they are learning. Although TBLT can take many shapes and forms, this pivotal role of tasks is its defining feature.

TBLT, as any form of practical learning, involves internalising new information coupled with the ability to use it. The nature of the process requires the learner to understand the new information in relation to its use, to understand the purposes the new information can serve, and to develop the capacity to use it. In other words, practical learning, as intended by TBLT, focuses on information, its use, and its purpose. Since information, its use, and its purpose are all by definition social phenomena, learning is socially situated. Where learners cannot apprehend the uses or purposes of new information, that information becomes decontextualized, and effectively useless – perhaps storable for a future time when its relevance might become apparent, but until then, only ‘archive’ material. Archive material can be important. But it is not the same thing as practical learning.

Every day we are surrounded by countless examples of these characteristics of practical learning. Learning to chop vegetables might seem a clear example of a perfectly decontextualisable skill. Yet, how vegetables are chopped depends on the vegetable, and on how it is to be cooked (fast boiled, slow boiled, sautéed, fried, rolled into sushi, etc.): the chopping varies according to purpose. Similarly grilling or frying cannot be learnt in the abstract: they vary according to what is being cooked. In woodwork, the choice of saw depends on the nature of the wood and the nature of the cut. In using maps, it is one thing to interpret the symbols on a map, and quite another to read a map when standing in a valley or wood and wanting to follow a route across country. Similarly it is fine to understand instructions for buying and using an underground ticket, but, as any new visitor to the London underground will agree, the knowledge derived from a set of instructions is not at all the same as the knowledge acquired by negotiating the facilities at a station. Unhinging information or skills from context impoverishes the object of learning, and in the process impoverishes the learner. Task-based teaching aims to address this problem.

In a pedagogic sense, tasks are classroom activities intended to develop language learning, in which learners use language, orally or in writing, with a focus on meaning,
in order to create, communicate, or derive non-linguistic understanding – information, feelings, ideas, or social relations. As an approach to language education, TBLT places tasks at the centre of the teaching and learning enterprise. Consequently, TBLT requires of learners, teachers, testers, materials and curriculum designers, and administrators a realignment of their understanding and use of other types of learning activity around tasks. It brings with it implications for the design and use of tests, for the education and development of teachers, and for the understanding and expectations of students, parents, and the wider public. And by the same token, the very learning and teaching of language are susceptible to change in nature: if tasks are used in schemes of work or whole programmes, this will almost inevitably affect the nature of the work teachers and learners engage in, alter the role and functioning of traditional form-focused or explanatory activities, change the uses of time within language programmes, affect the profiles of development of learners at different stages of development, re-configure the patterns of work of language teachers, and could well result in a re-articulation of the relationship between foreign language education and other parts of the general educational curriculum. The ramifications of the TBLT project are potentially considerable.

It was in response to this breadth of ambition that the first of what would become a biennial series of international TBLT conferences was held in Leuven in September 2005. In its wake, the present series of volumes: ‘TBLT: Issues, Research and Practice’ was launched. More recently, a tenth anniversary conference held in Leuven in 2015 celebrates the enduring interest that TBLT has stimulated. This volume marks that 10th anniversary by bringing together a selection of plenary addresses presented to the five conferences through those years – Leuven in 2005 (plenaries by Long, and by Norris), Hawai‘i in 2007 (Robinson and Skehan in a plenary point-counterpoint presentation, and plenaries by Samuda and by Van den Branden), Lancaster in 2009 (plenaries by Mohan and by Ortega), Auckland in 2011 (plenary presentations by Ellis and by McDonough), and Banff in 2013 (plenary presentation by Byrnes). The range of venues gives a first hint of the international importance that TBLT has attracted. The diversity of topics explored by the different chapters illustrates more clearly the richness of the overall theme. The fact that each of them opens up significant further seams of innovation and investigation for future exploration confirms that the TBLT project is indeed a multi-layered and multi-dimensional proposition.

The DNA of TBLT

The fecundity of the TBLT project arguably derives principally from two main sources. One powerful current emanates from work in second language acquisition (SLA). Up until the mid-1970’s, second language acquisition had prioritised the study of
the evolving states of learners’ interlanguage grammars, with interlanguage seen as a fluctuating, implicit, second language competence. Research initially generally aimed either to capture the broad sweep of the learner’s L2 grammar, and the sequences with which different parts tended to be acquired, and subsequently increasingly to concentrate on the ways in which the learners’ grasp of particular domains of the target grammar (such as a given tense, aspect, or mood) gradually evolved. With the emphasis on capturing learners’ ‘competence’, the overriding methodological theme of research at that time was to find ways of accessing interlanguage in action, rather than studying it through discrete-item tests. The concern with this methodological challenge, and the growing interest in small-scale aspects of learners’ grammars had two consequences. One was that it created a fertile terrain for studying how learners, in the interests of achieving communication, used spoken interaction as a locus for constructing grammatically effective utterances with their interlocutors, exploiting the surface of discourse as a space for elaborating their developing grammar. Secondly, and by the same token, it highlighted the potential value of studying learners’ language in the context of particular activities. Rather than seeking to capture a comprehensive image of learners’ language acquisition by harvesting exhaustive but relatively decontextualised samples of learner language, researchers became more interested in studying the use and learning of language in the (micro-) context of specific selected activities. In other words, the paradigm had been inverted: rather than attempting to gather overall views of learners’ language to detect macro patterns by an exhaustive battery of discrete item tests, instead researchers preferred to build up a general picture from the study of performance on a number of specific activities. It was this double movement which led SLA researchers to see tasks as an ideal research tool to conduct second language acquisition research: tasks provided the opportunity to study interlanguage development in the context of meaningful interactive use. This resolved the problem of accessing interlanguage in action. It also opened up a window on the ways in which learners can exploit interaction to achieve effective communication, and in the process, to gradually improve their grasp of the language. Finally, second language tasks offered a relatively controlled context for the study of language use and learning. In the process it enabled the micro-study of variation in language use and development. This development of SLA research did a lot to confer prestige within applied linguistics on the concept of task and on the wider construct of TBLT, and provided a powerful driver in the emergence of the field.

However TBLT has a second pedigree. As the opening paragraphs of this introduction suggest, a task-based approach has general educational relevance. Barnes’ (1976) landmark study of learning across the curriculum started from the view that historically, teaching revolved around what he called a ‘final draft’ approach to the use of language for learning. In that tradition, the roles of teacher and pupil are respectively to ‘assess’ (or ‘judge’) and to ‘present’ (p. 113). This assumption can percolate
into all aspects of classroom language, from the traditional ‘socratic’ form of teacher talk, through the numerous learning exercises and reading activities that can be used to structure lessons and schemes of work. For Barnes, however, this approach to pedagogy overlooked basic aspects of the nature of learning, and in the process it ignored an alternative approach to the use of language. Barnes founded his understanding of learning on the idea that learning involves progressively changing our personal systems of knowledge. He cited Britton’s (1970) view:

> Once we see man as creating a representation of his world so that he may operate in it, another order of activity is also open to him: he may operate directly upon the representation itself. (p. 20, Barnes’ emphasis)

That is, learning consists of learners working with their existing knowledge in order to rework it. To this end, Barnes proposed an alternative way pedagogic discourse, which he termed ‘exploratory’. An exploratory mode enables and requires different roles of the teacher and learner – that of the teacher being to ‘reply’ (that is, focus on ‘understanding’ what the learner is saying) while that of the learner is to ‘share’ his or her understanding with teacher and classmates. An exploratory mode deliberately provides time and space for the learner to activate and clarify her/his initial understandings, and then begin to modify them to meet a specific new challenge posed by the program. Barnes related the notion of ‘exploratory’ language to Bruner’s (1973) concept of a ‘hypothetical’ mode of teaching.

> [I]n the hypothetical mode the teacher and the student are in a more co-operative position with respect to what in linguistics would be called ‘speaker’s decisions’. The student is not a bench-bound listener, but is taking a part in the formulation and at time may play the principal role in it. He will be aware of alternatives and may even have an ‘as if’ attitude towards these, and may evaluate information as it comes. (p. 403)

The key point is to create a form of discourse in which learners are pushed to engage with issues by requiring them to formulate for themselves and thereby test out their understandings, surely a precursor of Swain’s (1985) concept of ‘pushed output’. The form of discourse, then, is deliberately intended to induce learners into what could be a pedagogically highly desirable mode of processing – in other words to take the risk of constructively trying out formulations, without which learning is impossible.

Barnes (1976) highlighted what for us might be a crucial aspect of this distinction:

> It is not that we cannot learn as listeners, but that what we learn is different. When we listen to someone else we can note each step he takes, and ‘follow the argument’ as the phrase goes, yet without grasping the underlying principles on which the argument has been based. Most of us have had the experience of following a lesson but then finding that we cannot do the exercises on it. When we are placed in the speaker’s position we have to have insight into principles in order to construct a step-by-step
sequence. It is this grasp of principles, of underlying structures, which makes the difference between rote learning and understanding. (p. 114)

This is not to undermine the argument developed by Ellis (2001) and Shintani (in preparation) in favour of the use of listening tasks within TBLT. Rather the point Barnes is making is that it is engagement in the task which affects how learners learn. That is, task-type activities introduce a crucial learning mode across the curriculum, and are central in providing the pressure, time, and space for learners to engage, adjust, and develop their existing knowledge systems to meet new challenges. Barnes then documented how task-based communication can act as a driving force to engage learning, whether in science classes, history classes, or English mother tongue classes. For example, working in groups, learners are tasked with enquiring into how and why air pressure might affect water in a flask, why and how a poem works or fails to work, and why and how early explorers in past centuries might have settled at a particular spot on a river bank (see also Mercer & Hodgkinson, 2008; North Yorkshire County Council, 2006, for other accounts of such activities).

The tasks however do not work on their own. Barnes showed that the groups engage with the tasks in different ways, and to different degrees, with potential implications for the quality of their learning. That is, a task is not a mechanism which operates unfailingly on learners: on the contrary it requires their interpretation, and their enquiring engagement to drive their active construals and constructive reasoning, all actively negotiated and supported by the teacher. In the process, Barnes showed how the various tasks provide a shared reference point for teachers’ and students’ joint construction of classroom discourse. Hence the teacher’s role too can be grounded in the task. Rather than the teacher simply providing positive or negative feedback in an asymmetrical, ‘final draft’ form of pedagogic discourse, both teachers and students can use whole-class interaction to question each other, to identify problems, to formulate, to seek and try out alternative reformulations. Teacher-class discourse can then become a terrain for sharing understandings derived from on-task work. At the same time this can prime students to take greater responsibility in handling future tasks. Students cannot simply idle their way through tasks and wait for the teacher to provide the answers. Rather, like any other pedagogical activity, the use of tasks becomes crucial to the current unit of work. Made purposeful, task outcomes become a productive resource for upcoming work. This relationship between student driven on-task work and whole class interaction between teacher and students points to the need for the teacher to take responsibility for helping to negotiate that relationship. Barnes himself makes clear this further pedagogical space when he says:

The [on-task] language strategies which [we have been discussing] cannot be encouraged by teaching methods which rely entirely upon teacher-class dialogue. Teachers should avoid on the one hand a teacher domination that discourages pupils
from active learning, and on the other the abandonment of pupils to their own devices. Thrown in at the deep end, some pupils might learn something, but teachers would be abdicating their duty if they did not take some responsibility for what their pupils learn. (p. 78)

In other words, while tasks are ultimately designed and deployed to create a space in which work is student led and from which teachers therefore step back, teachers must nonetheless retain responsibility for mediating the students entry into that space, support them while within it, and accompany as they leave it. That is, the teacher has a key role in negotiating with students not just their on-task work, but the uptake from that work in whole class interaction.

So a Barnesian perspective situates tasks as a central element within the dynamics of pedagogy and most particularly its discourse. TBLT also draws on this broader educational perspective, highlighting the issue of how teachers and learners can use tasks in educational programmes. Finally, as can be seen from the foregoing, TBLT is an approach to pedagogy that has challenged established beliefs and practices within both the domains of education and SLA. So although it now has a specific literature dating back nearly 35 years, in the bigger picture, TBLT is still an innovation.

These two strands – deriving from SLA and general education – weave around each other within TBLT debate, and specifically in the pages of this volume. By encompassing theoretical explorations of the principals underlying TBLT practice and design, and reports of empirical investigations – both hypothesis-based and descriptive – and by including both implicit and explicit critiques and controversies throughout, this collection of papers reflects a healthy and vigorously growing field. However, at the same time it is a field in need of significant additional empirical and theoretical exploration, as these papers also show.

**The fundamental challenge to the TBLT project**

In an intriguing article some years ago, Ericsson and Hastie (1994) discuss the state of research into thinking, which they provisionally define as “a sequence of internal symbolic activities that leads to novel, productive ideas or conclusions” (p. 38). Apart from the striking similarity between this definition and many people’s definitions of ‘learning’, the issues identified by the authors will also strike a chord with many working in TBLT, notably the differences between the views of laypersons and specialists. For instance while specialists would concentrate on the kinds of thinking that occur in tasks which are structured towards achieving a specific goal, a layperson would be more likely to focus attention on a wide range of examples of spontaneous non-specialised everyday thinking (see p. 38). And a layperson would be critical of studying thinking
in laboratory contexts, which they would consider ‘artificial’ and failing to “capture the more interesting forms of thinking in everyday life” (p. 39), preferring the use of less experimental and more observational and introspective research methods, an issue reflected in the polemic surrounding the pedagogical validity of contexts of task-based research (see for example Eckerth, 2009; Foster, 1998; Gass, Mackey, & Ross-Feldman, 2005). But more fundamentally perhaps for TBLT is the issue of the nature of the relationship between pedagogic tasks and real-world tasks (see for instance Ellis, 2003) and the significance of that relationship for concepts such as ‘transfer-appropriate processing’ (Segalowitz, 2010) and for students’ long term learning. In concluding their survey of research, Ericsson and Hastie focus more specifically on the learning of real-life skills, a potentially crucial issue for fields such as TBLT. They consider learning the two domains of leisure and work, and for both domains highlight the difficulty for participants of finding opportunities to learn within the context actual activities. Where leisure is concerned participants focus on “the inherent enjoyment of the leisure activity” which they refer to as the experience of “flow” (pp. 66–67). Enjoyment derives from participating at the participants’ existing level of ability.

States corresponding to flow and ‘highs’ occur under circumstances that are quite different from the goal-directed efforts to improve and refine performance in deliberate practice […]. Hence, expert performers and other individual find inherent enjoyment in many activities in a domain, but these activities are not those that are most instrumental in improving performance. (p. 67, my emphasis)

The problem associated with learning in the context of pleasurable leisure activities then might be described as one of integrating a focus on improvement of performance into the ongoing activity. Yet in the domain of work, a similar problem arises. People normally achieve a level of competence sufficient to manage the demands of their work. This means that

[w]hen errors and mistakes unexpectedly occur the focus is typically on dealing with the consequences of those errors rather than their causes. The real-time constraints of reliable production discourages (sic) individuals to explore new and alternative methods with unknown reliability. (p. 67)

Like the current writer, the reader will doubtless have personal experience of “dealing with the consequences of […] errors rather than their causes” in handling their own typing errors when word-processing. The key point for us is that engaging in normal real world activities is not of itself sufficient to ensure learning. Learners are more likely to ‘suffice’ (Simon, 1981, cited in Samuda, 2005, p. 242) – that is:

‘find[…] a match between the problem and their existing knowledge, and then to be quickly satisfied with the first ‘fit’ made, whether fully appropriate or not, thus
effectively rendering new problems solvable by making them conform to what is already known.' (Samuda, 2005, p. 242)

In other words, short-cutting learning. Thus Ericsson and Hastie conclude:

[H]igh levels of performance are not a natural consequence of extensive experience in a domain. The highest levels of performance are observed only after a decade of deliberate efforts to improve their skill. (p. 68)

Here then perhaps is the very heart of the TBLT project, around which much theorising, research, and debate is needed in order to ascertain its long term viability. For, as both educational and SLA strands of TBLT recognise (see for example Long, Robinson, Skehan this volume), it is not enough for learners simply to engage in task after task, in whatever order they please. Assuming that tasks do indeed offer a crucial dimension to learning, the key question then is perhaps how far, and in what ways, can on-task activity be productively used to promote learning within instructional programmes? Arguably this question is broader than its brevity suggests, taking in a swathe of issues such as task design, task implementation, task sequencing, the use of non-task activities around the task, teacher engagement around the task, the use of a TBLT diet over time and at different levels of proficiency, the balance of tasks within the broader language programme, task-based testing, programme evaluation, and teacher education.

The organisation of the volume

In the present volume, despite the wide range of themes addressed by the authors, a breadth which of course befits the plenary addresses from which they originated, this central issue is a recurring concern. For the SLA strand, it is reflected in chapters that study the impact on attention to performance either of varying on-task conditions (Skehan, pp. 123–156); of varying the aspects of task design and sequencing (Robinson, pp. 87–122); or of ensuring various types of reactive focus on form (Long, pp. 1–26); while for Mohan, Slater, Beckett, and Tong (pp. 157–192), the issue is one of assembling sets of topically related tasks, sequenced so as to engage learners in increasingly complex discourse types. On the other hand, those approaching the issue from a more educational perspective raise questions about the development of a task-based programme for higher education students (Byrnes, pp. 193–224); the nature and functioning of tasks within computer-mediated communication (CMC) programs (Ortega & González-Lloret, pp. 59–86); the role of program evaluation in developing a researched account of TBLT (Norris, pp. 27–58); the implementation of a one-year task-based programme (McDonough, pp. 225–246); teachers’ evaluations of their own design and use of tasks (Ellis, pp. 247–70); teachers’ classroom use and
reshaping of tasks (Samuda, pp. 271–302); and the impact of teachers’ and learners’
interpretations and re-interpretations of tasks on the development of TBLT (Van den
Branden, pp. 303–320). These chapters give welcome emphasis to the importance of
the teacher within a TBLT approach. Additionally some chapters orient significantly to
both historic strands of TBLT: Long for instance explores issues of programme design
within TBLT; Mohan et al., while concentrating on using tasks to orchestrate student
engagement in different types of discourse, discuss at length the educational nature of
discourse; while exploring the nature of tasks within the context of CMC programs,
Ortega and González-Lloret nonetheless relate their discussion to the SLA-derived
interaction hypothesis; Ellis’s educationally-oriented chapter reports action research
projects of four teachers which include an SLA orientation within their systematic
investigations into students’ on-task language; and McDonough’s teacher-based pro-
gram evaluation relates the teachers’ views to the potential value of encouraging lan-
guage-related episodes in students’ on-task work, a construct derived from the SLA
literature.

Above all else, this volume brings together a set of distinctive and substantial posi-
tion papers, offering a richness and engaging with a breadth of issues and discussion
unusual in a single collection of papers. These range from issues of educational philos-
ophy (Byrnes; Long; Norris), issues of the nature of language (Byrnes; Mohan et al.),
and the nature of psycholinguistic processing (Robinson; Skehan), the shaping of tasks
to different media (Ortega & González-Lloret), questions surrounding the teacher’s
use of tasks (Ellis; Samuda; Van den Branden), and the domain of task design (Ellis;
Samuda), and those of the theory and practice of program evaluation (McDonough;
Norris). More broadly though, all chapters without exception constitute significant
statements by leading contributors that make a point of confronting the field with
challenges for TBLT that cannot be ignored. As an area of applied linguistics, TBLT is
an empirical project. As such, its future surely depends on its readiness to accept such
challenges.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to John Norris, Virginia Samuda, Kris Van den Branden for very constructive com-
ments on earlier drafts of this chapter. Any limitations are the author’s own.

References


TBLT

Building the road as we travel*

Michael H. Long
University of Maryland

Developed since the early 1980s, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is informed by theory and research findings in instructed second language acquisition (ISLA), as well as general educational theory and practice, and responds to the growing demand for language programs tailored for learners with distinct functional needs in a second language (L2). The paper reviews TBLT’s rationale and psycholinguistic underpinnings, and then briefly describes procedures, problems, and findings in each of the six basic steps and components in designing, implementing, and evaluating a TBLT program – needs analysis, syllabus design, materials development, methodological principles and pedagogic procedures, student assessment, and course evaluation – before considering optimal and less than optimal settings for TBLT’s adoption. Expanded and modified considerably in response to developments in ISLA theory, research findings, and classroom implementation over the past 30+ years, TBLT remains a work in progress. As theorists, researchers, and practitioners, we are building the road as we travel.

TBLT: Definition and rationale

Language teaching has never been more important than in the 21st century. Vast numbers of people are now studying languages voluntarily for traditional reasons: to maintain or recover their ethnic heritage, as part of their religious beliefs, to access professionally or culturally important literature, to enter educational programs delivered through the medium of the L2, for tourism, or more mundanely (and perhaps not always voluntarily), because a foreign language is part of their school or university curriculum. Vast numbers of involuntary learners are obliged to learn a new language, often one of the world’s major ones, as a means of escape from poverty and turmoil, as a gateway to educational and economic opportunity, or as a path to safety for themselves and their families. Student numbers worldwide are truly staggering, running into the billions, and where qualified teachers are concerned, demand far outstrips supply. Increased access to technology-delivered instruction makes up some of the

difference, but the quality of most canned programs leaves much to be desired, starting with the problem that the same ones are marketed as appropriate for all purchasers.

Given (i) the surge in numbers, made ever more rapid by the increasing rate of growth of the world's population, (ii) the diversity of reasons for language learning, of which the above are but a few, and (iii) the importance of functional language abilities for so many, one might have expected significant investments in research and development and major advances in the way teaching is conducted, but if so, one would have been disappointed. Year after year, governments, businesses, educational institutions, and individual learners spend vast sums of money on language instruction, frequently with a meager return on investment, and on assessment (depressingly often in terms of students' progress on a growing number of so-called “proficiency scales”), but vanishingly small amounts are allocated to research.

Absent an empirically grounded knowledge base as a result, the way language teaching is conducted, long notorious for methodological pendulum swings (for a historical overview, see Musumeci, 1997), remains largely a matter of personal choice on the part of the teacher or program concerned and vulnerable to powerful commercial interests. Worse, the same program may be delivered to all students in ignorance of what are often their quite different L2 needs. Imagine the outcry if medicine were practiced that way, if treatments for the same problem varied widely depending on which hospital or physician (some with no formal training) one happened to approach, could be influenced by pressure from powerful pharmaceutical companies, and were prescribed without a medical diagnosis (i.e., regardless of what ailed the patient). How much louder the outcry if medical practitioners continued to proclaim their occupation a profession.

Of course, far more is known about health and healthcare, diseases, and their treatments than about how languages are best learned and taught or why success rates in many programs are so poor. (Worldwide, there are many more beginners than finishers.) But findings are now available from over 40 years of research on second language acquisition (SLA), the process language teaching (LT) is designed to facilitate, and on the relative effectiveness of different approaches to LT itself. Statistical meta-analyses have been published of research findings on several topics, for example, explicit and implicit learning and instruction, the comprehensibility of genuine, simplified, and elaborated input, focus on form and focus on forms, the role of task-based conversation, and the relative effectiveness of types of negative feedback. As a result, enough is now known to evaluate at least some classroom prescriptions and proscriptions, and ignorance is a less justified defense for the status quo than it once was.

In light of all the student heterogeneity and the progress in understanding SLA and LT effectiveness, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) was developed as an approach to identifying and satisfying diverse communicative L2 needs in a rational, efficient, psycholinguistically defensible manner. Instead of a one-size-fits-all
approach, genuine TBLT programs (i.e., task-based, not merely task-supported) start with a task-based needs analysis. The results enable program designers and teachers to identify what different groups of students require – an inventory of the target tasks for each of them, with data on their relative frequency and criticality, together with representative samples of target discourse involved in successful task completion – and (resources permitting) to select and sequence course content accordingly.

Employing task as the unit of analysis at all stages in program design, implementation, and evaluation makes what transpires relevant to students’ functional L2 needs, and visibly so. It has the additional advantage of fostering methodological and pedagogic choices compatible with what research on instructed SLA (ISLA) has discovered about the positive effects of, but constraints on, teaching. Finally, use of criterion-referenced, task-based performance tests allows student achievement to be assessed in terms of whether or not learners can accomplish the real world communicative tasks identified as relevant for them by the needs analysis.

Task-based language teaching (upper case, TBLT), it is important to understand, employs a task syllabus. It should not be confused with task-supported language teaching, which involves occasional use of pedagogic tasks to practice items in an overt or covert, pre-set linguistic syllabus of some kind. Task-supported LT suffers from the same serious weaknesses as any synthetic syllabus. I first outlined a primitive rationale for TBLT in courses at the University of Pennsylvania from 1980–82, and sketched the ideas publicly in a plenary address to the Inter-Agency Language Roundtable at Georgetown in 1983, a presentation published two years later (Long, 1985) in a book edited by Kenneth Hyltenstam and Manfred Pienemann, two more SLA researchers interested in establishing a theoretical and empirical base for LT. Expanded and modified considerably in response to research findings and classroom implementation over the past 30 years, TBLT remains a work in progress.

**TBLT’s consistency with research findings on ISLA**

The two major approaches to syllabus design are those Wilkins (1976 and elsewhere) labeled ‘synthetic’ and ‘analytic’. Synthetic approaches involve presentation of items in a linguistic syllabus of some kind (mostly grammatical, notional-functional, lexical, or a hybrid) in an order determined thousands of miles away by the author of a commercially published textbook, regardless of whether students (who the author never knew) are developmentally ready to process them on a given day. A synthetic syllabus is usually delivered via so-called present – practice – produce (PPP) methodology. In its most extreme form, syllabus items are presented one at a time, typically in model sentences that often constitute stilted models of what Widdowson (1972) termed usage, not use. They are practiced via an assortment of drills and linguistically
Michael H. Long

graded and “simplified” dialogs and reading passages written especially to illustrate the workings of the chosen form(s) or function(s), examples of which appear in the texts with abnormally high frequency. Input is limited and impoverished. Production is early and forced. The inevitable student errors are “corrected” overtly. It is assumed that learners can move from no knowledge to native-like performance of each item in one step, on demand, as dictated by the externally imposed syllabus embodied in the textbook, and that when the time comes, they will be able to synthesize the pieces (i.e., put them together) for communication (hence, the name). If students manage to regurgitate the target forms accurately during drills, and subsequently in their performance on various kinds of discrete-point tests, the approach is interpreted as having been successful, despite obvious differences between such forms of “language-like” behavior and real-world, spontaneous L2 use. The combination of synthetic syllabus, linguistically focused teaching materials, methodology, and pedagogy, and discrete-point tests, I refer to as a focus on forms. Syllabus content is the forms themselves. Language learning is intentional and teaching mostly explicit. The focus in classroom lessons is the L2 as object.

The synthetic syllabus and focus on forms have serious shortcomings. PPP assumes a largely discredited skill-building model of language development in which declarative ‘knowledge that’ is first proceduralized to become ‘knowledge how,’ and then, if time is sufficient and things go well, automatized through massive practice. While some people can and do learn foreign languages that way, the abilities the majority develop, while adequate, perhaps, for unspeeded reading and writing, are of limited use in real-time spoken communication. The simplified dialogs and reading passages illustrate the mechanics of the chosen form(s) or function(s) du jour, but while the tight linguistic controls improve comprehensibility, they simultaneously deny learners exposure to unknown, perhaps lower frequency, items, which makes learning them difficult, to say the least. The same course is delivered to all learners, with little or no consideration of their L2 needs.

A comprehensive review of what has been learned from research on ISLA is well beyond the scope of this piece, but it is clear that focus on forms is inconsistent with some salient research findings. It assumes that if groups of students are presented with items in an external linguistic syllabus at the same time and pace, they will learn the items simply because they are on the day’s menu, regardless of their developmental readiness to do so.¹ Numerous studies have shown that L2 development does not

¹. Most (not all, but most) text-based instruction, as found in content-based LT, is a suprasentential variant of structurally based teaching, the main difference being that target code features are first presented embedded in larger units, often content-area texts, before being isolated for teaching. It is still traditional focus-on-forms, and suffers from the same psycholinguistic problems as overtly grammar-based courses. There is the same improbability that the linguistic items the
proceed that way, and certainly not in sudden jumps from ignorance to native-like performance one linguistic item at a time. Instead, with some modifications due to L1 influence (see, e.g., Zobl, 1982), students acquire accurate command of structures in roughly the same order, regardless of the instructional sequences in a textbook or in classroom pedagogic focus (see, e.g., R. Ellis, 1989; Lightbown, 1983), and, crucially, only when they are processable (see, e.g., Mackey, 1999; Pienemann, 1984, 2011).

Teachers cannot usually teach what they want, when they want. Learners have a powerful cognitive say in the matter. Target forms are employed for non-target-like functions, and non-target forms for target-like functions (Long & Sato, 1984; Sato, 1990). Within many grammatical sub-systems, learners traverse seemingly universal, immutable interlingual sequences (for review, see Ortega, 2009), make errors as an inevitable, healthy part of the learning process, not something to be avoided, and often exhibit U-shaped and zigzag, not linear, development. They create interlingual forms that cannot be explained by reference either to the native language or to the structure of the L2. For example, Italian learners of English produce pronominal copies in relative clauses (*David is the man who he work with me; *Mary is the woman who I like her), when neither English nor Italian allows them (Hyltenstam, 1984; Pavesi, 1986). Native speakers of Japanese, Turkish, and other languages with post-verbal negation systems all use pre-verbal negation in early stages of L2A, even when the target language (e.g., English), does not (Stauble, 1984), and even when L1 (e.g., Turkish), and L2 (e.g., Swedish), both employ post-verbal negation (Hyltenstam, 1977). Learning is not a one-step, sudden, categorical, parameter-resetting process, either, but gradual, cumulative, and almost always partial and incomplete. There is increasing evidence that even seemingly native-like end-state grammars diverge from those of true native speakers in subtle ways (see, e.g., Sorace, 2003). In sum, learners are heavily cognitively involved; what teachers and textbooks can achieve is constrained by what Corder (1967) called the internal, or learner, syllabus. In Pienemann’s terms (Pienemann, 1984, 2011, and elsewhere), learnability (processability) constrains teachability. Additional problems include the fact that even though some L2 items are simple enough to be taught explicitly, many are not, and the totality of a language is far too complex, and the linguistic targets far too numerous, to be learned explicitly in the time available. The time problem is most obvious with vocabulary (Nation, 2006) and collocations (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2012), each involving thousands of items, but affects other parts of a language, as well.

texts happen to contain will accidentally constitute appropriate learning targets for a particular set of students on a given day. The students, after all, were unknown to the language teaching materials writer, or in the case of genuine texts, to the original authors. It is guaranteed, conversely, that many items will be unsuitable for those students.
The second major approach, the analytic syllabus, eschews use of a linguistic syllabus or a classroom focus on code features. Instead, students are exposed to holistic samples of the L2, such as short, genuine conversations or written texts, and most classroom interaction is communicative. Examples range from immersion education and content-and-language integrated learning (CLIL) to sheltered subject-matter teaching and the Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Syllabus content consists of subject matter of some kind, such as, math, science, history, social studies, literature, politics, art, culture, or current affairs. The L2 is used to teach students about one or more of those. Materials often consist of texts, or whole textbooks, originally written for native speakers (NSs) of the language concerned, not learners of the language. Sometimes, they are linguistically modified versions, intended for non-natives, but the focus is still on content, not language per se. Language learning is incidental, while doing something else. Learners are expected to analyze the input (hence, the name) and induce L2 grammar rules, word meanings, and so on, by experiencing their relatively natural use, much as they might during a study abroad program. Assessment may be based on students’ knowledge of the subject matter chosen for the course, or perhaps take the form of global proficiency ratings of their performance in class or in structured oral proficiency interviews. Language learning is incidental, and the L2 a medium of classroom communication. The whole approach is what I refer to as a focus on meaning.

Theoretical motivation for the analytic syllabus and a pure focus on meaning is also problematic. Analytic approaches implicitly assume that the adult’s capacity for incidental language learning (without intention, while doing something else, such as focusing on subject matter mastery) and implicit learning (without awareness) remain strong, whereas research on age effects and maturational constraints (e.g., Abrahams et al., 2009; Granena & Long, 2013) clearly shows this not to be the case. The capacity for implicit learning (Janacsek, Fiser, & Nemeth, 2012), and instance learning in particular (Hoyer & Lincourt, 1998), declines (not disappears) after the early years, a fact with special significance for the learning of arbitrary (i.e., non-rule-based) form-meaning associations, such as L2 vocabulary items and collocations, as well as non-salient grammatical features. Moreover, incidental learning, like explicit teaching and learning, takes more than the three to five hours a week available for most foreign language courses.

Classroom implementations of analytic syllabuses are an improvement over synthetic approaches in many respects. The focus on meaning and communication, rather than code features, allows for more interesting, more motivating, lessons better able to hold students’ attention, which is vital for acquisition. However, once again, they deliver the same syllabus for everyone, without differentiation for students with varying needs, and even after several years of nearly full-time daily exposure in immersion programs, tend to produce students competent in receptive
skills, but often with quite basic residual grammatical errors in their L2 speech and writing (Swain, 1991). Other problems include the excessive amount of time purely incidental learning requires, and as pointed out by White (1987), the inadequacy of positive evidence alone for “unlearning” grammatical options in the L1 that are ungrammatical in the L2 when the L1 is in a superset – subset relationship with the L2.

My proposal, a task-based analytic syllabus with a focus on form, was an attempt to promote language teaching that (i) tailors instruction to meet identified learner needs for functional abilities in a L2, (ii) avoids the shortcomings of the underlying theories, implementation, and results of synthetic and purely analytic approaches, and (iii) does so in ways that are broadly compatible with what SLA research has shown about how adults acquire second and foreign languages.

Focus on form (Doughty, 2001; Long, 1991, 2000; Long & Robinson, 1998) was one of the first of TBLT’s currently ten methodological principles (MPs), three of which – MP1: Use task, not text, as the unit of analysis; MP3: Elaborate, do not simplify, input; and MP6: Focus on form, not forms – are original to the approach. The idea is that in task-based, communicatively oriented lessons, the capacity of adults for explicit and intentional learning is recruited to compensate for the reduced (not lost) capacity for implicit and incidental learning during brief episodes in which their focal attention is drawn or directed, in context, to linguistic features and form-meaning connections, especially non-salient ones, needed to improve communicative effectiveness. Focus on form can help learners “notice” items in the input (in the sense of Schmidt, 2001, and elsewhere) that otherwise may escape them, as well as mismatches between the input and deviant forms in their output, especially when there is no resulting communication breakdown that might serve the purpose. The learner’s underlying psychological state is optimal in focus on form, less so for focus on forms (see Table 1). Once the grammar is “re-set” in this way, rather like a radio being tuned to a new frequency, the argument, following N. Ellis (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, and elsewhere) is that subsequent input can be parsed implicitly, encounters with further tokens of the forms or patterns in question serving to strengthen the new L2 representations stored in long-term memory.

Through focus on form, linguistic issues are dealt with at moments likely to be optimal for acquisition because triggered by learners’ processing difficulties and/or by their at least partially successful communicative attempts. Contingent on learner output, negative feedback of all kinds – from explicit, on-record “error correction” to implicit corrective recasts – as well as various kinds of “shaping” of learner output (e.g., expansions and complexifications of learner utterances and sentences), are more likely to be usable by learners at their current developmental stage. Grammar (in the broadest sense), especially non-salient features (DeKeyser, 2005), has to be taught in one way or another. Focus on form is more likely to achieve this than
focus on forms because the teaching occurs in response to indications of learners’ readiness to process the relevant feedback, that is, it respects the learner’s internal syllabus.

A critical factor, in two senses, is timing. First, focus on form must be responsive to learners’ current developmental stage to be effective. Put another way, the forms brought to learners’ attention must be “learnable” in Pienemann’s sense (see, e.g., Pienemann, 1984, 2011). Thus, in TBLT, it is recommended that teacher intervention often (not exclusively) be triggered by evidence of difficulty with the targeted features as learners work on communicative tasks. The intervention should be constrained, however, by teachers’ conscious or unconscious judgments as to the potential target forms’ learnability (hence teachability) at the time. Focus on form attempts to respond to a learner’s internal syllabus, and so is more likely to be psycholinguistically coherent. The fact that student production, with or without error, serves as a trigger for intervention means learners indirectly control the timing of focus on form, thereby helping to harmonize input with their developmental readiness to learn.

Second, unlike focus on forms (and contrary to what is mistakenly implied in some secondary sources in the applied linguistics literature), focus on form is, by definition, reactive, not proactive. As a result, learners’ underlying psychological state

---

2. It is reactive by the original definition, that is. A number of applied linguists have proceeded to change the definition, running studies comparing ‘reactive focus on form’ (a tautology) and ‘proactive focus on form’ (an oxymoron), thereby beginning to bleed the construct of meaning. This is a
for focus on form and focus on forms is very different, with the former far more conducive to learning. As shown in Table 1, in the case of focus on form, at the time a new item is presented – for instance, as a corrective recast, moments after a failed attempt to express or decode meaning for lack of, or misuse of, the code feature concerned – its meaning and function are likely already to be understood by the learner. This simplifies the learning task, and means that attentional resources are freed up. In focus-on-forms instruction, conversely, with no objective need for them, and psycholinguistically ready or not, learners are suddenly confronted by new forms and their equally unknown functions and meanings, simultaneously. Another advantage of focus on form is that, because learners have a present, felt need to communicate, coupled with awareness that they need help, they are more likely to be attending to the form in the input.

Norris and Ortega (2000) reported a statistical meta-analysis of studies comparing the relative effectiveness of (a) focus on forms, (b) focus on form, and (c) focus on meaning (simple exposure to comprehensible input). They found both (a) and (b) outperforming (c) statistically significantly, but no statistically significant difference between (a) and (b). For several reasons, this is a very positive finding for focus on form. Such studies are almost always short-term (often a matter of just a few hours), in order that researchers may maintain the experimental control required to permit causal inferences. Not much new can be taught in such a short period, so researchers generally focus on low proficiency learners and simple grammatical targets, a factor favoring focus on forms. Compounding the bias, outcome measures often employ a similar constrained response format to that used in the focus on forms treatment, while communicatively oriented measures that would better show what has been learned through focus on form are absent. (For detailed discussion, see Doughty, 2003. For a replication of Norris and Ortega’s findings, using studies published in the following decade, see Goo et al., 2015.)

A recurrent problem in language teaching and applied linguistics, witness ‘communicative language teaching,’ which has been so diluted over the years as to include virtually any lesson in which the spoken language is used, with the result that confusion and ambiguity reign in many areas. ‘Proactive focus on form’ does not exist; it should be called by its proper name, ‘focus on forms.’ It may turn out to be more productive than focus on form, although for anything beyond trivial elements of a language, the prospects look bleak, but nothing is gained by changing definitions willy-nilly. If someone pointed to a pick-up truck and proclaimed it another example of a Ferrari, people would wonder why, and suggest that it was more accurate, and more useful, to distinguish them. The distinction in and of itself would not necessarily imply that one type was better than the other, as each has its own (different) uses, and would certainly not entail that, but at least one would know that they were different.
TBLT’s complete theoretical and empirical psycholinguistic rationale is specified explicitly in a cognitive-interactionist theory of ISLA (Long, 2015, Chapter 3). In brief, research findings show that the human capacity for incidental and implicit learning does not disappear, but does decline, with increasing age. Instance learning is especially vulnerable to maturational constraints, so mastery of numerous arbitrary form-function relationships in any language, such as gender marking of nouns and other kinds of L2 collocations, will require recruitment of intentional and explicit learning to compensate for the abilities that have deteriorated. Drawing or directing learners’ attention to new items, constructions and form-meaning and form-function mappings, especially non-salient ones – in context, reactively, in harmony with learners’ developmental stage, via focus on form – increases the likelihood that learners will detect and/or notice them. Storage of those first traces of the new items in long-term memory is valuable in itself, but can also serve to re-set the way subsequent L2 input is parsed implicitly – that is to say, through the developing L2, not the L1, grid – in rather the same way that a radio frequency has to be retuned before it can receive a new station properly. Negotiation for meaning is very helpful in this regard, as it provides tailored, elaborated input and implicit negative feedback (e.g., in the form of corrective recasts) – just two of many ways in which the linguistic environment can be modified in productive ways for language learning, whether in instructional or naturalistic settings.

The approach also reflects a set of nine core principles from the philosophy of education: l’education integrale, learning by doing, individual freedom, rationality, emancipation, learner-centeredness, egalitarianism, participatory democracy, and mutual aid and cooperation (Long, 2015, Chapter 4). Working on pedagogic tasks can serve as a site for the realization of these principles, especially when tasks are designed in certain ways. To illustrate, instead of studying (what are often rather unrealistic) written texts reporting native-like performance by third parties of such target tasks as following street directions, making a telephone call, or attending a chemistry lecture, students themselves working on (initially simple, progressively more complex) versions of the tasks is an example of learning by doing. If what they work on is a two-way task, moreover, each participant is equipped at the outset with unique information required by all group members for successful task completion, so each is empowered to negotiate for meaning with the other learners in the group as they work to complete the task together. The two-way arrangement sits well, therefore, with the principles of egalitarianism, mutual aid and cooperation, and the greater quality and quantity of interaction two-way tasks usually produce are beneficial for language acquisition. A synergistic relationship of this type between the philosophical principles and desirable psycholinguistic conditions for language learning is typical. With very few exceptions, the implications of both the psycholinguistic and philosophical underpinnings converge on a coherent framework and a defensible set of criteria for evaluating practice.
**TBLT: A brief primer**

So what, then, is TBLT? What follows is a very brief description of the six major components of a genuine TBLT program. Despite TBLT’s relatively recent appearance, the empirical basis for the TBLT literature is already extensive, making it by far the closest thing available to a research-based approach to LT. Due to space limitations, references to a tiny fraction of that literature will have to substitute for a thorough review.

**Task-based needs analysis**

In just the same way that we would expect physicians to diagnose what ails us before prescribing a treatment, the first step in designing a TBLT program is to conduct a task-based *analysis of learner needs*. The importance attached to needs analysis (NA) as the first step in TBLT may initially appear puzzling, especially as it can sometimes be time-consuming and expensive. It is important, therefore, to illustrate its relevance, for it is one of the features that distinguishes TBLT from all other task-based approaches I am aware of, and it is also a potentially desirable feature of task-based education in general.

Even the briefest consideration of the widely varying abilities needed by the diverse learner populations of the 21st century shows why NA is crucial. At the one extreme, many refugees and migrant workers, illiterate in their native language, as well as the L2, must learn to use a telephone, cell phone, or computer (perhaps for the first time), find, and then keep, an entry-level job, obtain school admission for their children, rent lodgings, obtain street directions, negotiate public transport systems, secure emergency health care, open a bank account, and more. Some of these tasks are common to university students and blue-collar workers, white-collar professionals, and government officials arriving in another country, too. However, many members of those groups may not be planning trips to SL environments at all, and even if they are, may have little problem with any of the “social survival” tasks, but trouble understanding lectures on economics or chemical engineering, changing an airline reservation, completing a hospital internship for a vocational training course taught in the L2, buying a car, negotiating a business deal, or making an after-dinner speech, none of which are of much concern, in the short term, at least, to most refugees or migrant workers. The different groups’ language needs – the lexis, collocations, pragmatics, skills, genres, and registers required for the target tasks they must perform – are clearly not the same for the simple reason that what they have to *do* in and through the target language is so different. Reliance on the same “general purpose” textbook series year after year (while for obvious reasons, a practice favored by textbook authors and publishers) and teaching the (sic) language, rather than the students, on the grounds that “English is English is English,” do not bear scrutiny. It should also be remembered that