Practical steps towards task-based teaching

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While the body of research literature on task-based language teaching (TBLT) continues to grow, there remains a frustrating lack of consensus about what exactly *tasks* are and what *doing TBLT* entails. Moreover, the lack of simple, practical advice on integrating TBLT into specific teaching contexts, and the limited choice of commercially produced task-based teaching materials, make teachers trained in Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) methodology reluctant to abandon familiar practices in favour of TBLT. It seems necessary, therefore, to focus more attention on the practical steps that teachers can take in order to integrate the core tenets of TBLT into their teaching practice without abandoning methods, textbooks, and lesson-planning frameworks that offer security and give teachers the confidence that spawns creativity and innovation. Examples of such steps are discussed, including adding a meaning-focused goal to tasks; using recordings of native-speaker task performance; and eliciting written or spoken reports of task outcomes.

TBLT(Task-Based Language Teaching)の研究文献の数が増え続ける一方、「taskとは厳密には何か」及び「TBLTを取り入れるとはどういうことか」、といったことへのコンセンサスは依然として不十分なままです。さらには、特定の教育状況にTBLTを組み入れる、簡単で実用的なアドバイスが不足していることや、商業的に生産されたTBLT教材の選択肢が限られていることで、PPP(Present-Practice-Produce)方法論で訓練された教師は、よく知っているやり方を捨ててTBLTを選択することを躊躇してしまいます。したがって、教師に安心感を与え、かつ創造性や革新を生み出す自信を与えてくれるこれまでの方法、教科書、そしてレッスンプランの枠組みを捨て去らずにTBLTの中心的主義を組み入れるために、教師が取り入れられる実用的な手段にもっと注目することが必要に思われます。ここでは、そういった手段の実例を取り上げます。その例として、意味に焦点を当てた目標をtaskに加えること、ネイティブスピーカーのtask performanceの録音を使用すること、task outcomeを書面あるいは口頭でレポートさせることなどが含まれています。

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) unites a wide range of researchers and teachers who are agreed on at least one thing: If we want learners to develop the ability to use English for effective communication outside the classroom, we must engage them in communicative tasks that focus attention primarily on meaning, and distinguish these from form-focused activities that belong elsewhere in the lesson cycle. This starting point has spawned a rich and varied body of research into TBLT, within which several distinct branches stand out, including (1) seminal works proposing TBLT as a viable alternative to the predominant Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) teaching cycle (e.g., Candlin, 1987; Long, 1985; Long & Crookes, 1992; Prabhu, 1987), (2) *how to* books and papers offering frameworks and guidelines

for implementing TBLT (e.g., Nunan, 1989, 2004; Willis, 1996; Willis & Willis, 2007), (3) research into the connections between task variables and learner output (e.g., Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001; García Mayo, 2007), and (4) reports of TBLT in action in local contexts (e.g., Edwards & Willis, 2005; Leaver & Willis, 2004; Van den Branden, 2006).

However, despite the abundance of research literature in its support, in many parts of the world TBLT is still seen as a complex, cutting-edge method, suited only to particular learners in particular contexts, and requiring creative, highly motivated teachers. In Japan, TBLT has yet to capture the imagination of the majority of busy teachers, be they in junior and senior high schools, universities and colleges, or private language schools. Certainly some of these teachers have considered all the arguments and simply concluded that TBLT is not appropriate in the Japanese context (e.g., Sato, 2010). Perhaps some others are just set in their ways and do not have a mind to change the way they teach. However, I suspect that many teachers out there are vaguely familiar with TBLT, and interested in experimenting with alternative approaches, but do not really understand what TBLT is, less still how it can be adapted to an exams-driven system in which the syllabus is often imposed from above, and in which the majority of commercial textbooks are tailor-made for PPP methodology. This is a pity, for in reality there are many simple ways for teachers trained and experienced in other approaches to incorporate the core principles of TBLT into their own lessons, in a way that allows them to remain inside their own professional comfort zone and yet offers potentially significant benefits for their learners. In the remainder of this paper I discuss the various problems, concerns, and misconceptions that have so far prevented TBLT from gaining a strong foothold in Japan, before outlining a set of simple, practical steps for teachers new to the approach who are interested in finding out what TBLT can do for them.

Obstacles to the implementation of TBLT

Just what is a task?

It is easy to appreciate the sense of confusion many teachers feel with regard to TBLT if we begin by examining the simple question *what is a task?* On this fundamental issue there is a frustrating lack of consensus among writers. Long (1985, p. 63) defines a task rather vaguely as “a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward,” giving *painting a fence* and *dressing a child* as examples. Although this was just the starting point of a long debate, many teachers remain under the mistaken impression that TBLT demands the authentic simulation of real-world scenarios: having medical students interview simulated patients, having engineering students write operation manuals for machinery, and so on. Such tasks can certainly be used effectively in a TBLT framework, but actually few if any advocates of TBLT today argue that tasks *must* directly mirror real-world activities; what matters, they agree, is that tasks should focus attention primarily on meaning, and have a clear goal or outcome (for example, arranging items in an appropriate order, deciding a course of action in a given situation, etc.). However, the situation is complicated by the efforts of many authors to fine-tune this definition. Thus, depending on the writer, *task* may be defined as anything from “an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective” (Bygate *et al.*, 2001), to “a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form” (Nunan, 1989). Moreover, the term *task* is also widely used in contexts not related to TBLT, meaning that “almost anything related to educational activity can now be called a ‘task’” (Van den Branden, 2006, p. 3). No wonder teachers are confused.

What is task-based teaching?

Just as writers cannot agree on a universal definition of *task*, so further confusion is generated by the lack of a clear consensus as to how lessons should be structured around tasks. Two of the most commonly discussed frameworks are those proposed by Willis (1996) and Nunan (1989; 2004), respectively, and the differences between them are striking.

Willis argues that a task will not direct attention primarily to meaning if it is preceded by an explicit focus on specific language forms, and thus proposes the following three-stage lesson cycle:

1. Pre-task: Teacher introduces the topic, elicits topic-related vocabulary, plays recordings of advanced speakers performing a similar task, etc.
2. Task cycle: Learners perform the task, and then plan and give a report based on the task (e.g., explaining the goal, outcome, or solution they arrived at).
3. Language focus: Teacher guides learners in analysis and controlled practice of words, phrases and patterns in task-related texts/ transcripts.

Nunan, on the other hand, proposes a six-stage framework:

1. Schema building
2. Controlled practice
3. Authentic listening
4. Focus on linguistic elements
5. Freer practice
6. Introduce the pedagogic task

While similarities are clear—e.g., task as the main event of the lesson, the emphasis on listening texts that offer a model for task performance, etc.—the differences are so striking that it may appear odd that these two approaches come under the same TBLT umbrella. With a focus on form at stages 2 and 4, and the task itself at the very end of the lesson cycle, Nunan's framework is arguably closer to the PPP cycle than it is to Willis's task cycle. While both writers argue that a focus on meaning must be primary, they clearly have very different ideas about what that actually means. The result, alas, is more confusion on the part of teachers: Not only is the definition of *task* hard to pin down, but the term *task-based* is equally elusive. Moreover, it is not simply a matter of choosing between Willis and Nunan: Looking beyond these two authors, the situation is complicated further still by the fact that the label *task-based* "has come to be rather loosely applied as an umbrella term to refer to any context in which tasks are used, whether as an occasional activity to fill a gap in a lesson plan, or as the central mode of instruction" (Samuda & Bygate, 2008, p. 57).

TBLT and textbooks

A further concern is the limited availability of ready-made teaching materials. Even if one believes that, for example, Nunan's framework offers the best approach for TBLT, the only commercially-produced textbooks incorporating this framework that we are likely to find are those written by the same author (e.g., Nunan, 2001). Looking beyond Nunan, we find that textbooks designed to fit TBLT are generally few and far between, leading teachers to believe that the only way to implement TBLT is to create their own complete set of teaching materials. For busy teachers with little time for creating materials, or who feel more secure using a commercially-produced textbook, TBLT may thus not appear to be a realistic option.

Towards a new perspective on tasks and TBLT

A situation in which teachers are unsure of what TBLT is, or even of what a task is, and in which very few explicitly TBLT-based textbooks are available makes it understandable that most believe TBLT is not for them. Contrary to perceptions, however, there are in fact many ways in which the principles of TBLT can be applied in most teaching situations. In recent publications describing TBLT in action in local contexts, what we typically find are not tales of rigid adherence to a set of rules, but rather examples of how teachers create or adapt tasks and TBLT frameworks to meet the needs of learners in a given context (e.g., Edwards & Willis, 2005). That is, the teachers who report success in using tasks are often those who view tasks "as a pedagogic tool that can be used flexibly in different ways depending on purpose, setting, and context, rather than a set of *a priori* procedures and assumptions" (Samuda & Bygate, 2008, p. 60). This trend is reflected in the emergence of the concept of *task-supported learning and teaching* (Bygate, 2000; Ellis, 2003). The task-supported approach embodies the belief that tasks are important, but can be one of several elements in a syllabus, and can be used effectively in conjunction with other activities in the pedagogic cycle. This encourages teachers to focus not on TBLT as an all-embracing method, but on ways that tasks can enhance existing courses created with PPP or another approach in mind. Teachers who adopt this approach will find that tasks have much to offer, at the cost of few sacrifices. Indeed, the task design criteria identified in the literature, such as judging success in terms of task outcome, or making task completion a priority, can be applied just as well by teachers not consciously adhering to a particular TBLT framework. Meanwhile, selective use of recordings and transcripts can help to reduce or eliminate the *code-switching* (i.e., use of L1 during tasks) that can be the scourge of pair or group tasks in monolingual classes, and a nod to the not entirely untrue assertion that TBLT is simply *PPP upside down* implies that teachers can often make better use of textbook tasks simply by reordering the activities in the textbook.

Tasks within a non-TBLT framework

Criteria for success with tasks

Teachers who want their learners to experience the benefits of meaning-focused task interaction, but for whom full adherence to a rigid TBLT framework is not a realistic option, are advised to begin by familiarizing themselves with the six criteria suggested by Willis and Willis (2007) for determining how task-like an activity is. Similar criteria are commonly encountered in TBLT literature, and can be used as a practical guide for creating or adapting tasks for classroom use. Let us examine these criteria.

1. Does the task have a goal/ outcome?

Textbook activities may give learners topics to discuss, but is there a clear purpose to the discussion, beyond simply practicing English? Is there a reason to listen to what classmates say? And how will students know when they have finished? For example, a textbook unit focusing on school subjects and timetables may at some stage invite learners to *ask and answer questions about your school schedule*, or a unit on food might invite them to *discuss the food you like and dislike*. More generally, *have a conversation like the one above* is an instruction that most teachers will have seen, but which rarely produces authentic-sounding dialogues in which learners are genuinely engaged. This lack of engagement, I would argue, is a direct result of the lack of a goal. The obvious solution, then, is to add a goal, or substitute a different task to elicit target language. For example, rather than simply having learners *ask and answer questions* about their school schedule, a more goal-oriented set of instructions like these could be substituted:

1. *What are the bad points about your weekly schedule? List three things you would like to change (e.g., "We need more English lessons. Once a week isn't enough.")*
2. *Exchange ideas with classmates. List three more good suggestions that you hear.*

Figure 1. Task: A better schedule

The requirement to collect three good suggestions both sets a clear yardstick for task completion, and creates a need to pay attention to other speakers. Similarly, if discussing likes and dislikes regarding food, learners could check how similar or different their tastes are, or could try to predict a partner's answers before checking the accuracy of their predictions. In general, tasks will be more effective if instructions specify a clear goal, less effective if they simply offer a context to practice prescribed phrases and structures.

2. Is success judged in terms of the outcome?

Simply having a goal or outcome may be insufficient unless it is clear that success is judged in terms of this goal. Taking the example above of changes to a school schedule, instructions may specify the goal as selecting three schedule changes from among those suggested, but what will the teacher do during the task? And what will happen after the task? If the teacher circulates among students, showing enthusiasm, helping, facilitating, supplying the odd word or phrase to ease communication, then this reinforces the importance of the goal. However, if the teacher simply listens out for linguistic errors and corrects them on the spot, the message is that the stated goal is not what really matters. Likewise, unless the task is followed by some form of discussion or report in which learners share their findings/decisions, again learners may not see the task as goal oriented.

3. Is the focus primarily on meaning?

In TBLT it is vital to distinguish communication tasks that focus attention primarily on meaning from language practice activities that focus attention on language form. Both have their place, but the two should not be confused, nor should we attempt to combine both in one activity; unfortunately, this is exactly what seems to happen in many textbook activities. But how do we identify tasks with an appropriate focus on meaning, and what warning signs should we look out for? To some extent this will depend on the instructions. If instructions prescribe a particular structure (e.g., *Ask 5 questions beginning "Have you ever…?"*) then clearly attention is focused on language form. However, even an engaging, seemingly meaning-focused task can be spoiled by what appears on the same page. The next time you use a textbook communication task, ask yourself whether an *example dialogue* is really just an example, or actually a covert order to use prescribed structures. Similarly, beware of *useful expressions* if they appear likely to be seen by students as *required expressions*. Textbook writers also frequently slip in ostensibly helpful advice that may in fact direct attention away from meaning. For example, a gentle reminder to *speak in complete sentences* may seem reasonable, but in fact makes quite unreasonable demands, asking learners to do something that even native speakers would find hard. Anyone who doubts this is invited to use only complete sentences the next time they are engaged in spontaneous, unplanned conversation, and to note both how difficult this is and how unnatural it sounds.

4. Is there some relation to real-world activities?

As noted above, classroom tasks need not be restricted only to activities that literally occur in the real world. However, tasks should be designed to elicit language and patterns of discourse that learners are likely to encounter in the outside world. For

example, collaboratively listing important inventions of the last decade is perhaps not something learners would do outside the classroom, but if it promotes the use of appropriate language to give and justify opinions, persuade, agree and disagree, and so on, then it is helping learners develop competence using discourse moves that they will require in the outside world. Likewise, a task in which names of body organs must be identified from their definitions does not mirror something that doctors usually need to do, but exposes medical students to vocabulary and expressions that they may need when talking with a patient.

5. Is the task interesting/ engaging?

Perhaps the most important of all task criteria, this may also be the hardest to judge. What makes a task interesting or engaging depends on factors such as students' interests, students' actual or perceived needs, whether the task poses an appropriate cognitive and linguistic challenge, and hence whether learners are likely to feel a sense of achievement at completing the task. It may equally depend on subtle factors such as the enthusiasm shown by the teacher, the clarity of the instructions, class size, students' previous experiences with similar tasks, and so on. More than any other, this criterion relies on the teacher's experience and instinctive feel for what works with a particular group of learners. What does seem certain is that "without engagement, without genuine interest, there can be no focus on meaning or outcome. Learners have to want to achieve an outcome, they have to want to engage in meaning" (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 13).

6. Is completion a priority?

In short, are the students given enough time to finish, and does the teacher encourage them to do so? The best of tasks may fail if they are squeezed into less time than they require, while if the teacher appears relatively unconcerned about whether or not students finish, then students are not likely to approach the task with any sense of urgency.

Mini-tasks and reordering of activities

In referring to these task design criteria to produce more task-like classroom activities, teachers should not limit their attention only to the main pair or group activity of a lesson or textbook unit. Textbooks often include task-like activities in places where they are easily overlooked. For example, units often start with a warm-up activity involving answering quiz questions, matching or sequencing items, brainstorming, or sharing opinions. Usually intended to elicit or introduce target language, such activities may already satisfy most or all of the task design criteria described above, and a little tweaking may make them satisfy others. For example, if the textbook includes a suitable list of warm-up questions, but tells learners only to *answer the questions*, then the teacher can easily create a mini task cycle by adding a suitable goal (e.g., *ask and answer in pairs; note how many answers are the same*), and a report stage. Likewise, a set of comprehension questions following a listening or reading passage can easily become a task if, for example, learners close their books and list the answers they remember; alternatively, they could list three extra facts not mentioned in the questions/answers accompanying a listening passage. Basically, any part of a textbook unit may include activities that are either already tasks in the TBLT sense, or can easily be made so. It is perhaps ironic that many ready-made tasks are not identified as such in textbooks, while the heading *task* often appears before an activity that focuses attention primarily on form: The ubiquitous instruction to *practice the dialogue in pairs using your own information* is a prime example of the latter.

The fact that commercial textbooks are typically designed

with some variant of PPP in mind means that it is also important to consider the order of activities. Grammar-focus activities are usually found before the main communicative task, often immediately before it. This can encourage learners to approach the communicative task with attention focused not on meaning and achieving a real outcome, but merely on reproducing the highlighted language forms. If this is a concern, then simply saving such grammar-focus activities until after the communicative task is one practical step in the direction of implementing TBLT. Likewise, while a few words here or few phrases there can help students to complete tasks successfully, if task instructions are accompanied by example dialogues or long lists of *useful language* that appear to actively discourage learners from experimenting with any other language, the teacher might want to initially downplay these. Often it may be possible to do tasks with books closed, or simply ignoring the model language given with task instructions may be enough to make sure that learners refer to it only if and when they find themselves unable to express a particular meaning. After the task has been completed, this language can then be given closer attention, and compared with other ways learners may have found to express similar meanings. The teacher might then ask learners to repeat the task, or perform a similar task, thus giving them another opportunity to experiment with words, patterns, and phrases they struggled to access in the initial task.

Facilitating authentic task interaction

A further step towards successful use of tasks, and one that is especially recommended for teachers who find themselves feeling frustrated by learners' use of L1 during tasks, is to make room in lessons for a focus on the interactive lexical phrases that support fluent L2 task interaction. As this is rarely treated effectively in textbooks, learners frequently struggle to keep in English during tasks because they lack the required mental pool of short, simple phrases to begin tasks (*OK, let's start*), sequence interaction (*Next…. / Now let's….*), give feedback (*OK / Really? / Yes, me too*, etc.), agree and disagree (*I think so, too / I don't agree*, etc.), and so on. Where instruction focuses only on the target structures deemed central to the task—in the example below questions and answers using *Have you ever…?*—then all too often the interactive moves that support the discourse are performed mostly in L1, as in this example from my own data:

S1: ***Hai ikimasu…****Have you ever missed the last train home?*

S2: I/ No I haven't. I only bus.

S1: ***So da ne. Basu da ne.*** *Good.*

S2: Have you ever had a hang/ hangover…in class?

S1: ***Nan dakke, futsukayoi dakke?*** *No, I haven't. I drink only a little.*

S2: Oh good girl.

S1: ***Tsugi Aya.*** *Have you ever had a big argument with parent/ parents or friends?*

S2: Yes, I have.

We cannot rectify this simply by asking learners not to use L1. Put another way, we cannot expect learners to suddenly produce language and discourse patterns they have not previously had exposure to and focused attention on. However, the use of L1 during interactive tasks can be significantly reduced, or eliminated entirely, if only teachers make time to record learners, use those recordings to raise awareness of when and why they use L1, and then allow learners to study examples of native speakers or advanced learners performing similar tasks, in order to learn ways to make the necessary interactive moves in English. As I have previously reported (Hobbs, 2005), I found this approach very effective with these particular learners: A

few weeks later the use of Japanese during interactive tasks had been all but eliminated, and natural sequences of interaction like the following had become the norm:

S1: Next question.

S2: OK.

S1: What are your favorite summer activities?

S2: …First exercise.

S1: Ah ok.

S2: Second…barbeque…three...third…swimming.

S1: Ohhh I like swimming too.

S2: Can/ can you swim?

S1: Yes I can.

S2: Great.

S1: Thank you…next…. Is travelling abroad important to you?

This is thus another example of a practical step towards more effective use of classroom tasks that does not require strict adherence to any particular TBLT framework.

Conclusions

The aura of mystique surrounding TBLT will no doubt remain for some time, with most teachers continuing to view it as a method that is either inappropriate for their own teaching context, requires too much additional planning and preparation, or requires the acquisition of too many additional teaching skills and techniques. The reality is that TBLT is not really a method at all, but rather a set of values and principles that can guide teachers in creating lessons that clearly distinguish form-focused practice from meaning-focused interaction—while allowing suitable attention to be given to both—and enable learners to develop both knowledge about how the English language works, and the ability to use English to communicate effectively in the widest possible range of real-world situations. Teachers who choose to take practical steps towards task-based teaching will find themselves moving in the same direction as each other, but they need not start from the same place or move at the same pace. Whatever your learners' needs, whatever restrictions are placed on you in terms of curriculum, textbooks, and exams, it is well worth considering what task-based teaching can offer you, and how you and your learners might benefit from those small, simple first steps towards TBLT.

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