ELIA
Estudios de Lingüística Inglesa Aplicada

KEY CONCEPTS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS/CONCEPTOS CLAVE DE LA LINGÜÍSTICA APLICADA
Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)

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1. Introduction

When you ask learners why they enrolled in a language class, they typically will give answers like 'because I need it for my study and work'; 'because I want to be able to talk with the family of my partner'; 'because it is my favourite holiday destination and I want to be able to speak to the people' or 'because I really like the language'. In all the years, I have worked as a language teacher myself, I have never met a student who answered: 'I really wanted to learn past progressive' or 'I need to become better at phrasal verbs'. Sometimes, a student might wish to have 'more vocabulary and better grammar' as they feel they cannot express their intentions well enough for smooth communication. Still, irrespective of whether they are intrinsically motivated to learn the language or take a more instrumental view as they need it for educational or professional reasons, language learners across the globe usually learn a language because they want or should be able to do something with the language in interaction with people that also use that language to communicate. Inherently, second language (L2) learning is to a large

extent socially driven: we want to become a member of the community of speakers that use the target language (Atkinson, 2010). These voices stand in contrast to what we still see in a lot of language teaching material and course books, that adhere to a structure-focussed PPP tradition: isolated structures are being **p**resented and explained – followed by exercises to **p**ractice them – followed by communicative activities where students can demonstrate that they can **p**erform in the language using the target structure. In the early 1980s, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) emerged as a functionally oriented alternative to the PPP tradition (van den Branden, Bygate & Norris, 2009). In this short essay, I will present the main concepts and ideas that underly task-based language pedagogy.

2. Task and Focus on Form

The TBLT approach proposes that real-life tasks, that is, those activities that the target language community engages in outside the classroom, should form the guiding principle of language learning and teaching. Thereby, a task can be defined loosely as "the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between" - a famous characterisation by Long (1985: 89). As such, a task can be anything people do: buying fishing gear, discussing the news, listening to a podcast, or playing with grandchildren. Over the years, researchers have formulated more specific definitions, of which the one by Samuda and Bygate (2008: 93) is probably the most useful for language teaching practice: 'By 'task' we refer to some kind of pedagogic activity which requires communicative language use, in order to achieve a pragmatic outcome other than to practice language, but with the overall aim of promoting language development.' This definition encompasses the criteria that had been brought forward earlier by Skehan (1998) and reiterated by Ellis and Shintani (2014), that is, that tasks are pedagogic activities learners perform as part of their language course, and that

— focus on meaning, or in other words, they are meaningful;

— have a non-linguistic communicative outcome that learners are asked to work towards;

— elicit authentic language use (e.g., because they have a real-world relationship) and learners aim to perform them with their own linguistic resources.

East (2021) highlights that by performing tasks learners ultimately will become more adequate and fluent users of the target language.

The notion of *Focus on Form (FonF)* is closely related to the task-based approach (Doughty & Williams, 1998). FonF contrasts with Focus on FormS (FonFs) and Focus on Meaning (FonM). Traditionally, language teaching builds on FonFs, that is, L2 users are expected to first learn forms (i.e., grammar rules) and vocabulary and synthesize those for language use. Early perspectives on communicative language teaching emerged as a reaction to the FonFs tradition and rejected any attention to language form. According to FonM, learners should, like children learning their mother tongue, be immersed in meaningful language use as through immersion, they would learn the L2. TBLT adopts a FonF approach, which is at the mid-point between these two extremes. Accordingly, engaging in meaningful communication during task-based performance can be accompanied by (brief) attention to language form as to enhance L2 learning. The earliest and most strict versions of TBLT adhered to, what is called 'reactive' FonF: in reaction to learners struggling with a certain form or expression during task performance, the teacher would briefly focus on language form to help the learner perform the task better. For example, when the task includes writing a text message to a friend and students struggle with certain language forms, the teacher would use the text messages written by the students to spontaneously go over the different formal aspects of language that the learners demonstrated to need support with. Nowadays, also more structure-focussed tasks belong to the

repertoire of TBLT: a task might be deliberately designed to elicit certain language forms and teachers will use planned FonF to guide learners' attention to their use. For example, when students write the above text message as part of a task where they report about a recent trip, the planned FonF could target past tense verbs.

Samuda (2001) reports on an exemplary classroom-based study that showcases a task with planned FonF targeting the use of English expressions for possibility and probability (i.e., *must, might, may, could*). The students were given a list of items that, allegedly, were found in the pockets of a coat, with the task to speculate and discuss in small groups about the identity of the owner of the coat, and then present their joint decision as a poster. Throughout the full task-cycle consisting of a pre-task, the main task, and a post-task, learners received scaffolding and guidance on the language that typically goes hand in hand with low (*could*, *possibly*) versus higher (*must*, *probably*) levels of probability of speculations.

3. The Cycle of Pre-, Main- and Post-Task

According to Willis (1996), a task cycle is divided into three focal stages:

(1) During the *pre-task*, the nonlinguistic goal and the topic of the task is introduced and learners engage with some input that often provides an model of successful target task performance. For example, if the target task in the real world would be to write an apologetic email to the local librarian because you spilled some coffee on the book you borrowed, the pre-task would consist of reading different emails and/or watching short clips of people expressing such an apology in the oral mode.

(2) The *main task* consists of students performing the task. Ideally, task performance includes some repetition and expansion which allows students to grow in their language

use. For example, the main task could engage students in a game where they pick cards of the top of three decks, the first one saying (a) what happened (e.g., coffee spilled on book; favourite jumper shrank in the laundry; damage to car paintwork due to fallen bicycle); the second specifying (b) who is the addressee (e.g., best friend; the Queen; hungry toddler); and the third indicating (c) what modality to use to formulate the apology (formal letter; email; voice message). As they take turns in performing the task, this inherent task repetition enables them to reuse earlier successful language. At the same time, the changing context, which is slightly different based on the characteristics of the cards they have drawn, will push them to expand their current linguistic repertoire.

(3) In the final *post-task* phase, students analyse and reflect on the language they have used, and typically, guided Focus on Form will help them to learn from the task cycle as a whole. For example, they would compile a joint list of successful expressions they used as a group during the main task. With some teacher guidance, they would then rank these expressions in order of formality (which ones you may use in conversation with your hair dresser vs. a judge) to grow in awareness about the functional adequacy of different language forms.

Early TBLT scholars, would restrict FonF activities to take place during the post-task only as reflection and awareness-raising were the main points and pre- or main-task FonF would only be possible as a reaction to students' task performance. It has become clear, however, that different FonF techniques can be implemented throughout various points in the task cycle. The pre-task stage is ideal for input flood, input enhancement and awareness-raising activities where students' attention can be drawn to specific target structures or forms more implicitly. For example, students might be asked to listen to a song and fill in a bingo card, that lists useful expressions for target task performance. During the main task,

typical FonF techniques include recasting, output enhancement (i.e., repeating adequate language used by students with emphasis) and peer feedback. Often, one participant of a main task student group would receive the role of note taker, who is tasked to write down useful language they hear in their peers' performances. In the post-task phase, students can also be asked to work with their own performance. For example, if they recorded their oral main task performance with a mobile phone, the post-task could invite them to transcribe their spontaneous speech and transform it into an email by creating an accurate and adequate written version.

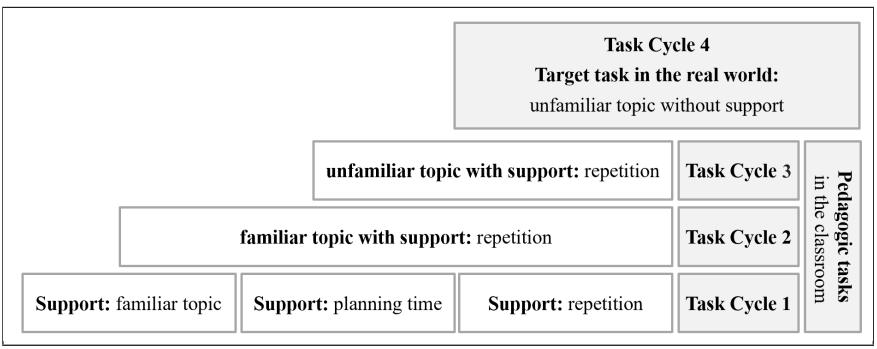
4. The Unity of a Task-Based Lesson Series

How to sequence tasks has received ample attention of task-based researchers (Baralt, Gilabert, & Robinson, 2014). In one of the earliest publications, Candlin (1987) classified tasks in terms of cognitive complexity, communicative stress, and code complexity. *Task complexity* takes into account characteristics such as familiarity of the topic and the number of elements an L2 user has to deal with (e.g., Robinson, 2011). For example, a decision making task about food can be simple, if it is about coming to an agreement with a friend about what to order pizza or sushi; while in its most complex version it might be about taking a decision for a formal business dinner with the choice between a set menu, walking buffet or à la carte with accompanying suggestions for drinks and guests having different dietary restrictions. *Communicative stress* relates to factors that create beneficial circumstances for task performance, for example, providing planning time (Ellis, 2005) or allowing several repetitions before one has to do a task for real (e.g., Bygate, 2018), vs. those that create more stress, such as limiting time for the task itself (e.g., perform in 2 minutes) or circumstances that put up stress (e.g., texting with time to think about and in-between messages vs. an active phone call that requires instant turn-taking). *Code complexity*

refers to the language that is needed to perform a task. Often, this can be related to grammatical structures and vocabulary (Skehan, 1998) but it can also be more functional. For example, a task about a past experience is most effectively completed if an L2 user knows how to employ both adverbials and past tense verbs. Yet, for a beginner learner it might be sufficient if they know some frequent adverbials, while a highly advanced L2 writer needs to eloquently make use of a full repertoire of linguistic references to the past including adequate implementation of a variety of verb tenses.

The teacher and material designer is responsible for providing adequate support throughout a series of task cycles that together work towards target task performance. Support comes by taking into account factors of task complexity, communitcative stress, and code complexity. In other words, other than taking different grammatical structures as the basis of sequencing exercises and activities (e.g., the typical order of present – past – future – conditional, that characterizes many commercial textbooks) a task-based syllabus would identify several target tasks, and then would present a series of pedagogic tasks leading up to that target task that promote L2 development by eliciting performances with growing task complexity and communicative stress. Figure 1. provides a schematic overview of such a sequence.

Figure 1: Example of sequenced pedagogic task cycles working towards target task performance



There remain a couple of tricky questions for educators. First of all, how does one identify target tasks? Long (2005) provides a detailed perspective on how to perform a needs analysis, that is, an in-depth inquiry into the different communicative tasks a specific group of learners might need (e.g., hotel receptionist; professional football players) - see also Serafini et al (2015). In their more practical and shorter review, Gilabert and Malicka (2021) not only explain the basics of a needs analysis that draws on using multiple sources (e.g., experts, documents) and multiple methods (e.g., interviews, observations) but also share insights on how a teacher can design pedagogic tasks once a needs analysis has been completed, and it is clear what target tasks they wish to work towards.

Another question is related to how several task cycles of pedagogic tasks can from a unity. As a teacher educator myself, I often notice that beginning task designers have many creative ideas of different tasks (each consisting of pre/main/post-task activities) that together make up a sequence of, for example, three lessons that should lead up to target task performance. In Michel (2022), I introduced the idea that task sequences should - like a Greek tragedy - follow Aristote's classic notion of the unity of action, time, and place. In other words, ideally, all the tasks and materials that are used in a lesson series that work towards target task performance, are little building blocks that together form a coherent whole. Every piece of the lesson series, be it the video clip used as input during the pre-task of task cycle 1, or the short blog students write as a main task in task cycle 2, or the post-task of task cycle 3, where learners are tasked to create digital flip cards for their peers to support learning the ten most useful expressions for the target task – they all need to align with each other. More practically, vocabulary that is provided as input in the first task, needs to be useful for main task performance, and ideally is being repeated and elaborated throughout the series of tasks. It might end up as one of the items of 'useful language' in the post-task of task cycle 3. The same holds true for the topic, that is, if the target task is to negotiate prices of a new apartment with a

housing agent, all task cycles should be about housing and build up language that is needed for negotiation. Consequently, repetition of the same or a very similar task in a slightly elaborated context is a inherent component of task-based pedagogy.

5. Summary and Conclusion

In this essay, I have introduced the basics of task-based language teaching in a nutshell, whithout tapping too much into the underlying philosophy. Yet, TBLT is not just learners performing tasks. The approach builds on decades of scientific investigations into L2 learning and instruction (cf. the review of the interactionist approach including the Input-Output-Interaction triad, by Loewen and Sato, 2018), and therefore is better characterised as a researched pedagogy (Gilabert, 2023). Following the newest insights on how second language develops over time (Lowie & Verspoor, 2022), TBLT adopts a usage-based perspective on language learning and teaching, which acknowledges that language is learned through use. In this light, the ultimate goal of L2 instruction is to enable L2 users to perform different target tasks in the real world (booking a hotel room; small talk with a shop owner; listening to a university lecture). By performing a series of pedagogic tasks in the classroom, learners can be guided step-by-step to reach target task performance. Pedagogic tasks incrementally help learners to develop their L2 by engaging them in authentic language use during task performance in the class (Ellis, 2006). As educator, the teacher supports L2 development by (a) choosing and/or designing appropriate pedagogic tasks, (b) sequencing them in a way that they promote L2 learning, and (c) providing appropriate scaffolding and a safe environment during all phases of task-based performance to maximalize student learning. All these aspects have been researched extensively, while the current paper only briefly mentioned the key points. Further reading in this area would allow for more elaborate

insights, and I therefore recommend the open access book by East (2021), the comprehensive volume by van den Branden (2022), and a hot-off the press article by Gilabert (2023) who links the theory of TBLT to task design practice.

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