A study on Task-based Language Teaching: From theory to practice

Siros Izadpanah

(English Department, Islamic Azad University of Zanjan Branch, Islamic 45139-76615, Iran)

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to introduce Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), to carry out the method of TBLT in English classes and to create a real purpose for language use and provide a natural context for language study. Considering the principles of TBLT (i.e., authentic, learner-centered, using language, intentional and interactive), it seems tasks as classroom undertakings that are intended to result in pragmatic language use. Tasks are a central component of TBLT in language classrooms because they provide a context that activates learning processes and promotes L2 learning. It is important to remember that TBLT is an approach rather than a method. It assumes that the teacher respects the students as individuals and wants them to succeed. It also acknowledges that motivation, attitudes to learning, students' beliefs, language anxiety and preferred learning styles, have more effect on learning than materials or methods. We therefore need to take these into account in classrooms, taking advantage of the opportunity TBLT gives teachers to promote a student-centered learning environment. Teacher-centered controls, threats, rewards and restrictions are not an effective means of stimulating learning, since no-one can be forced to learn. If we can instead stimulate a need to learn, and a desire to learn, based on unconditional respect and mutual trust, learning will take place in an enjoyable and facilitative way.

Key words: task; TBLT; task-based; classroom practice

1. Introduction

With the advent of the communicative language teaching approach in the early 1980s and much emphasis on learners' communicative abilities over the last two decades, the term Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) came into prevalent use in the field of Second Language Acquisition in terms of developing process-oriented syllabi and designing communicative tasks to promote learners' actual language use. Within the varying interpretations of TBLT related to classroom practice, recent studies exhibit three recurrent features: TBLT is compatible with a learner-centered educational philosophy (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2005; Richards & Rodgers, 2001); it consists of particular components, such as goal, procedure, specific outcome (Murphy, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Skehan, 1998); it advocates content-oriented meaningful activities rather than linguistic forms (Beglar & Hunt, 2002; Carless, 2002; Littlewood, 2004).

Since then, continued theory building and an ever growing body of empirical research has brought this field of interest to full maturity, a fact that is impressively demonstrated by research overviews in book length (Ellis, 2003) and several edited volumes (Bygate, et al., 2001; Leaver & Willis, 2004; Edwards & Willis, 2005; Ellis, 2005; van den Branden, 2006; Garca Mayo, 2007).

Since the early days, the primary goal of TBLT has been, firstly, to describe, to analyze and to predict the language use and the communicative patterns learners are engaged in when accomplishing a task; and secondly, to

Siros Izadpanah, lecturer of English Department, Islamic Azad University of Zanjan Branch; research field: English language teaching.

determine the contribution of these communicative patterns to Second Language Acquisition. In this respect, TBLT addresses questions which are at the center of attention in Second Language Acquisition research. These are concerns, such as the relationship between target language perception, processing, production and language learning. The central goal, then, was to establish a close relationship between a certain learning environment (the task), a communicative behavior resulting from this learning environment (task-based L2 performance), and Second Language Acquisition (task-based L2 learning). As LONG and Crookes (1987) have stated: It should be possible to build up a multi-dimensional classification, organizing tasks in terms of their potential for second language learning on the basis of psycho linguistically and psychologically-motivated dimensions (p. 197).

2. Theory

During the 1980s, CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) was dominant in the field of SLA (Second Language Acquisition). Ellis (2003) argued that CLT has traditionally employed a Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) procedure mainly directed at the linguistic forms of the target language. Willis (1996) states that presentation of a single point of grammar or a function, practicing of newly grasped rule or pattern (drills exercises, dialogue practice), and relatively free language production in a wider context consolidate what has been presented and practiced, such as a communication task or a role play activity.

However, the PPP approach has its skeptics (Willis, 1996; Skehan, 1996; Ellis, 2003). Willis (1996) points out that "production" are not achieved very often outside the classroom (p.135): Learners often fail when communicating (i.e., they do not do it, or they do it but not well) with native speakers. Skehan (1996) also argued that students do not learn what is taught in the same order in which it was taught, so the presentation, practice and production of material do not always line up. Ellis (2003) summarizes two reasons for this result: First, research in the field of SLA has demonstrated that learners do not acquire language the same way as it is often taught, which is presentation followed by controlled practice and then production (i.e., the PPP model of instruction); Second, learners take a series of transitional stages not included in PPP to acquire a specific grammatical feature.

Table 1 Traditional classroom and TBLT classroom (Nunan, 2005)

Traditional form-focused pedagogy	TBLT classroom
Rigid discourse structure	Loose discourse structure
Teacher controls topic development	Students able to control topic development
The teacher regulating turn-taking	Turn-taking is regulated by the same rules
The teacher knows what the answer is to	The teacher does not know what the answer is to
Students' responding role and performing a limited range of language functions	Students' initiating and responding roles and performing a wide range of language functions
Little negotiate meaning	More negotiate meaning
Scaffolding for enabling students to produce correct sentences	Scaffolding for enabling students to say what they want to say
Form-focused feedback	Content-focused feedback
Echoing	Repetition

These insights from SLA research showed that language learning is largely determined by the internal process of the learner. Skehan (1996) argued that learners do not simply acquire language when they are exposed to it. However, the exposure may be "orchestrated" by the teacher. He considers that learning is promoted by activating acquisition processes in learners and thus requires an approach to L2 learning and teaching that

provides a context that activates these processes. According to Richards and Rogers (2001), "Tasks are believed to foster a process of negotiation, modification, rephrasing and experimentation that are at the heart of second language learning" (p. 228).

Nunan (2005) describes the difference between the traditional classroom and the TBLT classroom based on the TBLT theories. This establishes clear guidelines for differentiating between traditional form-focused pedagogy and the TBLT classroom. Even though this distinction does not always work, it is helpful to understand what the TBLT classroom might be like in Table 1. This distinction between the traditional classroom and the TBLT classroom provides teachers with a better understanding of how TBLT is different from the traditional classroom.

3. Definitions of task

The core concept of TBLT is the task. The definition of a task has evolved over the last 20 years through empirical research in classroom implementation. There are different definitions based on everything from the real world to pedagogical perspectives of tasks. For a balanced view on tasks, the definitions from various perspectives are discussed chronologically (see Table 2).

Table 2 Definition of tasks

Researchers	Key concepts
LONG (1985)	What people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between?
Breen (1987)	A range of work plans for exercise and activities in language instruction.
Littlejohn (1998)	Any proposal within the materials for action undertaken by the learners to bring up the foreign language learning.
Skehan (1996)	Meaning, task completion, the real-world and outcome are focused.
Willis (1996)	A classroom undertaking for a communicative purpose to achieve an outcome.
Ellis (2003)	A work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically to achieve an outcome.
Nunan (2005)	A piece of classroom work to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form.

LONG (1985) introduces the concepts of tasks, defining (target) task as:

> A piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus, examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient, sorting letters, making a hotel reservation, writing a check, finding a street destination and helping someone cross the road (p. 89).

LONG's tasks (target tasks) here are very closely related to the real world. Tasks in this definition can be related to tasks that both use and do not use language. Without language use, some tasks, such as painting a fence can be achieved. Nunan (2005) argues that LONG's definition of task does not necessarily involve language use.

The pedagogical and real worlds are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, as researchers in the TBLT approach claim, there should be some connection between the two. However, tasks which are used in language classrooms need to contribute to developing communicative abilities. Recently, researchers (Breen, 1987; Littlejohn, 1998; Skehan, 1998; Willis & Willis, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2005) have become interested in the pedagogical tasks which can work in the language classroom.

From pedagogical perspectives, real world target tasks are likely to be too difficult for learners to achieve because of potential semantic, pragmatic, lexical and syntactic difficulties. Thus, pedagogical tasks should represent a bridge to real world tasks. Breen (1987) tries to define task from the pedagogical perspective:

> …any structured language leaning endeavor which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task. "Task" is therefore assumed to refer to a range of work plans which have the overall purposes of facilitating language learning-from the simple and brief exercise type, to more complex and lengthy activities such as group problem-solving or simulations and decision-making (p. 23).

Breen's definition of task does not clarify how task is different from practices or exercises. It is a broad view. According to Breen, all kinds of activities relating to language learning can be tasks. However, tasks are not synonymous with practices or activities (Nunan, 2005). Thus this definition does not seem to help teachers to understand what tasks are.

Drawing on Breen's (1987) definition, Littlejohn (1998) proposed a broader definition:

> … "Task" refers to any proposal contained within the materials for action to be undertaken by the learners, which has the direct aim of bringing about the learning of the foreign language (p. 198).

With this definition, each task can be shown reflecting the three aspects of process, participation and content. Process means what teachers and learners go through; classroom participation concerns whom learners work with in the process. Content is something that learners focus on (Littlejohn, 1998).

Skehan (1998) also synthesized the characteristics of a task: (1) Meaning is primary; (2) Learners are not given other people's meaning to repeat; (3) A task has some connection to the real-world; (4) Task completion has some priority; and (5) The assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.

Stressing both meaning and form, Ellis (2003) also defines task in a pedagogical way. Drawing on research, he recently defined a task as:

> A work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance direct or indirect to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills and also various cognitive processes (p. 16). Ellis' (2003) definition is very pedagogical because it includes attention to meaning and engagement with grammar in addition to other major points in language teaching, such as inclusion of pragmatic properties, use of authentic language and cognitive process.

Lastly, Nunan (2005) defines task as:

> A piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning; Nunan's (2005) definition emphasizes the pedagogical tasks' involvement in communicative language use. Nunan views tasks as being different from grammatical exercises because a task involves achieve outcome. There are more perspectives in defining tasks than those discussed here, which come from the different contexts in which tasks are used. Table 2 summarizes the key concepts of other definitions as well as the definitions discussed above. This table includes a variety of definitions of task, but throughout all definitions, tasks relate to goals reached through active participation of learners.

In conclusion, considering the principles of TBLT (i.e., authentic, learner-centered, using language, intentional and interactive), the author defines tasks as classroom undertakings that are intended to result in pragmatic language use. Tasks are a central component of TBLT in language classrooms because they provide a context that activates learning processes and promotes L2 learning.

Nunan (2005) suggests the following 8 principles of TBL:

(1) Scaffolding: Lessons and materials should provide support to the students.

(2) Task chains: Each exercise, activity and task should build upon the ones that have gone before.

(3) Recycling: Recycling language maximizes opportunities for learning.

(4) Organic learning: Language ability "grows" gradually.

(5) Active learning: Learners learn best by actively using the language they are learning. They learn by doing.

(6) Integration: The lesson should teach grammatical form and how the form is used for purposes of communication.

(7) Reflection: Learners should be given opportunities to think about what they have learned and how well they are doing.

(8) Copying to creation: Learners should not only drill and practice what has been written for them, but also be given the opportunity to use their creativity and imagination and what they have learned to solve real world tasks.

4. Application

Task was defined as an activity in which "the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome" (Willis, 1996, p. 23). For the TBL framework, a three-phase, pre-task, task cycle, post-task (language focus) process, combining features of the TBL frameworks by Willis (1996), Gatbonton (1994), and Estaire and Zanon (1994) was developed.

The pre-task phase has two basic functions: (1) To introduce and create interest in doing a task on the chosen topic; (2) To activate topic-related words, phrases and target sentences that will be useful in carrying out the task and in the real world; and (3) Optional function is the inclusion of an enabling task to help students communicate as smoothly as possible during the task cycle.

The task cycle consists of the task(s) plus planning and report phases in which students present spoken or written reports of the work done in the task(s). During the task phase, students work in pairs or groups and use whatever linguistic resources they possess to achieve the goals of the task. Then, to avoid the risk of developing fluency at the expense of accuracy, they work with the teacher to improve their language while planning their reports of the task.

Before or during the task cycle, the teacher can expose students to language in use by having them listen to a recording of other people doing the task, or by having they read a text related to the task topic.

The final phase in the framework, the language focus, provides an opportunity for form-focused work. In this phase, some of the specific features of the language, which occurred naturally during the task, are identified and analyzed. Among the possible starting points for analysis activities are functions, syntax, words or parts of words, categories of meaning or use, and phonological features. Following the analysis activities, this phase may also contain a practice stage in which the teacher conducts practice of the new word, phrases or patterns, which occurred in the analysis activities, the task text or the report phase.

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of the above framework is that it moves learners from fluency tasks to accurate production rather than from accurate production of target structures to fluency tasks. Therefore, the central question the author confronted in his attempts to redesign the Tyndale materials was: How can a structural/functional syllabus, which moves learners from accuracy to fluency, be redesigned to fit a TBL framework which moves learners from fluency to accuracy.

To begin the process of creating the new program, it was first of all necessary to develop a plan that could be followed when adapting a unit of structural/functional materials. It was decided that the first step would be to consult the table of contents and find out what functions are covered in the unit. The next step would involve analyzing the various activities that comprise the unit and discover if any of them could serve, or be adapted to serve, as a central communicative task around which a TBL framework could be constructed in order to teach these skills.

Once a task or series of tasks had been decided upon (either by selecting a suitable activity in the Tyndale materials, adapting an activity in order to meet the definition of a task, choosing a task from another source, or designing a new task), the next step was to construct a TBL framework around the chosen task(s). Following this, the author analyzed the remaining activities in the unit to see if any of them could be used, or adapted for use, in the other phases of the TBL framework and then added whatever else was needed to complete the framework.

It is quite common now that when some of us teachers design the tasks for teaching a lesson, the tasks lose their "taskness". They become more like exercising focusing on discrete aspects of language. And indeed, many of the so-called tasks do not satisfy the definition of a task. For example, most of the listening teaching is designed like this:

Pre-listening	Presenting some words and ask students to read and learn first. Teachers may give the definition of the new words.
While-listening	Teachers play the tape for the students to listen for the 1st time, students listen and get the general idea. And then play the 2nd time, design some True or False or Wh-questions to help students to get the detailed information. Then teachers check the answers.
Post-listening	Teachers ask students to retell what they have heard and check again.

It is quite doubted that whether these activities or steps should be called "tasks"? The author thinks both teachers and students will feel dull and bored by doing these asking, answering and checking.

So in addition to design what type of task to include in a lesson, the teachers need to make decisions about what students will be asked to communicate about and what skills or abilities the students need to be trained through the task. Thus, a key element in the design of the task must be to the choice of thematic content. Now the syllabus of the textbook the teachers are using is developed for the Communicational Teaching Project. Many of the tasks included are built around the themes that are directly related to the students' school or social life that they are expected to be familiar with. Now what the author is interested in and also more concerned about is how the teachers put those wonderful tasks into practice in each individual lessons, making students learn and fulfill those tasks through carrying out the effective activities designed by the teachers.

Now the author would like to use the framework for designing the task-based lessons and his/her teaching experience to demonstrate his/her ideas.

Now the author will use the lesson once he/she used the task-based teaching in designing as the example to illustrate. The lesson is extracted from the Senior High textbook—New Standard English Book 2 Module 2 *No Drugs*—the listening part.

The task of the lesson is to listen to a conversation between an interviewer and a journalist about the danger of taking drugs and ask students to do a report and make another interview to realize the relation between drugs and crimes and call on them to stay away from drugs.

It is designed as follows (see Table 3):

Table 3 Framework for designing the task-based lessons

Phrases	Examples of options
A. Pre-task	Framing the activity Planning time Doing a similar task
B. During-task	Time pressure Number of participants
C. Post-task	Learner report Consciousness raising Repeat task

4.1 The pre-task phrase

The purpose is to prepare the students to perform the task in ways that will promote acquisition. We know it is very important to present a task in a way that motivates learners. There are some alternatives which can be tackled procedures in one of the 4 ways below.

(1) Supporting students in performing a task similar to the task they will perform in the during task phase of the lesson.

(2) Asking students to observe a model of how to perform the task.

(3) Engaging students to non-task activities designed to prepare them to perform the task.

(4) Strategic planning of the main task performance.

Activity 1

Present a story with the new words by reviewing the text taught in the previous lesson, make the words related to each other and let students guess what the topic might be in this lesson (see Figure 1).

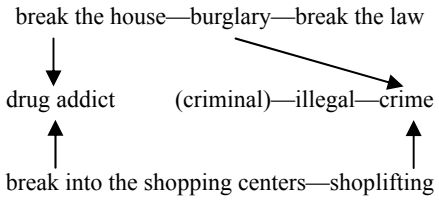


Figure 1 Framing the activity to perform a task

This is designed to raise learners' consciousness about specific features of task performance. It concludes some learning strategies, e.g., "learning to live with uncertainty" and "learning to make intelligent guesses". Thus, students can be taught to help become adaptable, creative and inventive.

Activity 2

Listen to the tape—the conversation between an interviewer and a professor, talking about the danger of drugs and related crimes. It seems to be a sort of exercise for listening comprehension, but it provides a model as well.

Through this activity, students are asked to observe a model of how the task can be performed. Students can be trained by doing the practice in listening, but also get idea about the "ideal" performance of the task, just as Skeham (1996) and Willis (1996) suggest that simply "observing" others perform a task can help the cognitive load on the learners. Then students are required to pay attention to how the speakers keep their conversations going and some key points, which helps students to identify and analyze the features in the model text and help overcome some communication problems as well.

Activity 3

Ask students to find out the key points that 2 speakers use in their conversation and how they use them. Then the students can be given time to plan how they will perform the task. The strategic planning may involve the provision of linguistic forms/strategies for performing the task. The teachers may provide some guidance. The guidance may focus students' attention on form or content. As Skeham (1996) suggests that learners need to be made explicitly aware of where they are focusing their attention—whether on fluency, complexity or accuracy.

Another option concerns the amount of time students are given to carry out the pre-task planning. General speaking, 10-15 minutes is quite suitable.

4.2 The during-task phrase

The methodological option available to the teachers in the during-task phrase is of 2 basic kinds. First, there are various options relating to how the task is to be undertaken that can be taken prior to the actual performance of the task and thus planned for by the teacher. These will be called "task performance options". Second, there are a number of "process options" that involve the teacher and students in online decision making about how to perform the task as it is being completed.

Activity 4

Group work. Teacher set the task to the students. Each group acts a role according to the request below and thinks and discusses—what questions you may ask and how you will answer and this activity can create the information gap between students.

Group A Act as interviewers (journalists from the local TV station).

Group B Act as professor who has done research on the drugs and crimes for about 10 years.

Group C Act as drug addict who has taken drugs for 3 years and now has put into prison for committing crimes.

Group D Act as police officer who has been dealing with the crime related to drugs for 5 years.

When the task performance is being carried out, the following 3 things should be put into consideration:

(1) Whether to require the students to perform the task under time pressure.

(2) Whether to allow students access to the input data while they perform the task.

(3) Whether to introduce some surprise element into the task.

The teachers need to ensure that students can complete the task in their own time and then set a time limit to encourage fluency rather than accuracy. When students are carrying out the task, the teachers should allow students to borrow the useful related information from the input data to encourage students' participation in the task, especially for those poor learners, especially when they feel speechless. And of course, while discussing, some unexpected questions and answers will come up, for the students' imagination and creativity have been greatly motivated. And it may help to enhance the students' intrinsic interest in the task.

On the other hand, achieving the processes during the task is quite challenging. It depends on how the participants orientate to the task and on their personal skills in navigating the roles of interlocutor/language users and instructor/learners as the task is performed.

4.3 The post-task phrase

The post-task phase affords a number of options. These have 3 major pedagogical goals:

(1) To provide an opportunity for a repeat performance of the task;

(2) To encourage reflection on how the task was performed;

(3) To encourage attention to form, in particular to those forms that proved problematic to the learners when they performed the task.

Activity 5

After the students have a heated and exciting discussion, two students are chosen from Group A to be the TV presenters to arrange for an interview for the program named "Tell as it is". Remind them to be aware of the TV presenters should say at the beginning of the program and the skill of asking questions and ask the questions to the right people. Later, ask them to interview any other students who act as professors, police officers, and drug addicts according to their own wills. And other students are asked to give the proper response according to the roles they play.

It is known that when students repeat a task their production improves a lot when they are told to repeat the task publicly in front of the class, of course, it may increase the communicative stress, but it gives students an opportunity to show their ability and their wonderful work, through which they can get the self achievement.

4.4 Evaluation

As the task-based approach is so popular, it must have its own advantages. Among the other advantages of using a task-based approach to language teaching is that, it:

(1) Allows for a needs analysis, thus allowing course content to be matched to identify student needs.

(2) Is supported by a large body of empirical evidence, thus allowing decisions regarding materials design and methodology to be based on the research findings of classroom-centered language learning (This distinguishes it from other syllabus types and methods, which have little empirical support).

(3) Allows evaluation to be based primarily on task-based criterion-referenced testing. Students can now be evaluated on their ability to perform a task according to a certain criterion rather than on their ability to successfully complete a discrete-point test.

(4) Allows for form-focused instruction. There is now considerable evidence (LONG, 1988), particularly from research studies which have compared naturalistic L2 learners to instructed L2 learners, that form-focused instruction within a communicative context can be beneficial.

Like any other teaching approach, TBL is not perfect. But it also has its shortcomings. Any approach alone does not solve all problems. Any approach alone does not meet all the requirements.

5. The disadvantages of the traditional teaching

In traditional English teaching, the translation approach, the TTT approaches (Test-Teach-Test or the others) and other approaches were used. Then, English teaching researcher tried many teaching methods. Among them, the PPP approach (Presentation, Practice and Production) is the most influential method. But no matter what method it is, teachers design activities from pedagogical angle, but hardly consider in terms of life. The role of teacher is just person who inculcates the knowledge but not leader. All the methods more or less make the subject lose its interests; the students' innovation ability can not be improved as well. As a result, when the students go into the society, they often follow the beaten track and are not brave enough.x

6. Conclusion

Since TBLT is a new approach requiring a change in methodological focus rather than a new method requiring the wholesale learning of new teaching techniques, a text based on a structural/functional syllabus can provide some activities out of which task-based frameworks can be constructed. While a variety of design changes and changes in how the materials are used will typically be required, the biggest challenge for a designer involves

redesigning grammar practice exercises into post-task language analysis activities and coming up with tasks intensive enough to allow for comparative analysis.

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