The task approach to language teaching

Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to provide a general introduction to the task approach to language teaching. In the first part of the chapter I shall review the evolution of task-based language teaching (TBLT) in terms of its history, conceptual underpinnings, and empirical research. I shall then examine current key issues and concepts including text and task authenticity, content-based instruction, learning beyond the classroom, and performance-based assessment. In the final section of the chapter, I shall look at some future trends for this particular approach to language pedagogy.

1. Background

In this section, I will sketch out the historical background to task-based language teaching (TBLT). In doing so, I will highlight the conceptual shifts in our understanding of language and of language learning. I will also show how more sophisticated approaches to research into instructed second language acquisition, which looked at classroom processes as well as learning products, revealed that, for teachers at least, ‘task’ was more central than ‘method’ in defining what they do.

1.1 Historical background

Prior to the 1980s, language teachers, writers and researchers were preoccupied with a search for the ‘best method’ of teaching a foreign language. From the 1960s through to the 1980s, a series of large-scale (and expensive) psychometric studies were carried out to settle once and for all the ‘methods’ debate. The results were disappointing and inconclusive. These studies were known as ‘black box’ research because they collected pre- and post-experimental data in the form of test scores, but failed to actually investigate instructional processes inside the ‘black box’ (that is, the classroom itself). It was therefore impossible to interpret the results of the studies.

This changed in 1982 with the publication by Swaffar/Arens/Morgan of a study into the relative efficacy of two instructional methods, audiolingualism and cognitive

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code learning on the acquisition of German as a foreign language. SWAFFAR [et al.] did collect process data, and were therefore able to provide an explanation for the inconclusive results. Like previous studies, they were unable to demonstrate the superiority of either audiolingualism or cognitive code learning. They concluded that:

“Methodological labels assigned to teaching activities are, in themselves, not informative, because they refer to a pool of classroom practices which are universally used. The differences among major methodologies are to be found in the orderly hierarchy, the priority assigned to the tasks” (SWAFFAR/ARENS/MORGAN 1982: 31).

SWAFFAR [et al.] went on to argue that for teachers, pedagogical task, not method, was the salient building block of pedagogy. Although their concept of task was far from well-defined, their work reinforced the growing importance of task within communicative language teaching. It is to the development of communicative language teaching and the relationship between CLT and TBLT that I now turn.

In a survey article of language teaching in the Twentieth Century, CELCE-MURCIA (2001b: 5–8) identifies nine approaches. Following ANTHONY (1963), she defines an approach as a broad theoretical perspective on pedagogy with its own set of principles and research base. Language teaching methods are derived from approaches and specify procedures for operationalizing a given approach. The nine approaches described by CELCE-MURCIA are: grammar-translation, direct, reading, audiolingualism (predominantly a North American approach), oral-situational (favoured in Britain), cognitive, affective-humanistic, comprehension-based, and communicative. For some of these approaches, conceptions of language and learning stood in violent opposition. For others, the differences were more of emphasis.

Much has been written about communicative language teaching (CLT), and it is beyond the scope of this chapter to rehearse the evolution of the movement in any great detail, although it is, highly significant to the story of TBLT. CLT represented a seismic shift from knowledge-based views of language learning (i.e. that acquiring a second or foreign language was basically a matter of internalizing a body of content) to a performance-based approach (which views second/foreign language acquisition as a process of acquiring communication skills). While mastery of the three linguistic subsystems of sounds, words and grammar were seen as necessary, they were no longer regarded as sufficient for the ability to communicate in another language. Communicative competence (HYMES 1966, 1972)1 also required discourse competence, sociocultural competence and strategic competence. Discourse competence is concerned with the ability of the learner to comprehend aural and written texts and to produce spoken and written texts that transcend isolated words and sentences. Sociocultural (originally sociolinguistic) competence concerns the social and cultural side of language use: basically knowing how to say what to whom when. Strategic competence is the ability to ‘cover one’s tracks’ linguistically. No one, not even the most skilled native speaker has

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1 Although the concept of communicative competence was first introduced by HYMES in 1966, it only began to acquire traction in language pedagogy about a decade later.
perfect knowledge and skill. The ability to repair breakdowns in communication resulting from this less than perfect knowledge is therefore an important aspect of communicative competence.²

Over the last thirty years, ideas on the nature of language and the language learning process have changed rapidly. Until the 1970s, approaches tended to be knowledge-based.³ At that point, CLT began to evolve, and some time later, TBLT emerged. Although the conceptual and empirical basis for CLT had been around since the early 1970s, it did not begin to appear in ‘official’ curriculum documents until more than a decade later. This reflects the experience of educational innovators who maintain that innovation can take more than ten, and up to thirty years to enter institutional bloodstreams.

A case in point is Japan. It was not until the 1990s that the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Culture spelled out that

“[The objectives of ELT are to] develop students’ ability to understand and to express themselves in a foreign language; to foster students’ positive attitudes towards communicating in a foreign language, and to heighten their interest in language and culture, thus deepening international understanding” (WADA 1994: 1).

Similarly, in Hong Kong, in 1999, the Ministry of Education announced that:

“The task-based approach [upon which the English language curriculum is built] aims at providing opportunities for learners to experiment with and explore both spoken and written language through activities that are designed to engage learners in the authentic, practical and functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Learners are encouraged to activate and use whatever language they already have in the process of completing a task. [...] All in all, the role of task-based language learning is to stimulate a natural desire in learners to improve their language competence by challenging them to complete meaningful tasks” (CDC 1999: 41).

As I have already indicated (following CELCE-MURCIA 2001b), CLT refers to a broad theoretical, even philosophical approach to language pedagogy. Like all approaches, it is realized at the level of classroom action by more than one set of methodological procedures. These days the dominant methodological realization of CLT is TBLT along with closely related variants such as project-based teaching and content-based instruction. In the next section, I will offer a detailed definition of TBLT as well as setting out some of its key principles.

I refer to TBLT as a ‘methodological realization’ of CLT rather than a ‘method’, because unlike other methods such as the Silent Way, Suggestopedia, and Total Physical Response, which have tight-knit classroom procedures and routines based on

² For a succinct and accessible introduction to CLT in general, and communicative competence in particular, see SAVIGNON (2001).

³ It is difficult to characterize audiolingualism. From one point of view it could be seen as performance-based, although the ‘performance’ was to carry out a range of repetition, substitution and transformation drills, rather than perform communicative acts, and the methodology aimed at developing implicit rather than explicit, declarative knowledge.
learning theories of one kind or another, TBLT has a number of variants, with their own emphases (see, for example, ELLIS 2003; SKEHAN 1998). For this reason, it sits somewhere between an approach and a method.

Classroom-based research, particularly naturalistic research, seeks to describe and interpret what actually goes on in classrooms. The research indicates that there is frequently a gap, between policy pronouncements and actual pedagogical practice. I have worked as a teacher, teacher educator and researcher in many countries, including Japan and Hong Kong, and have consistently been brought up short by the gap between ministerial rhetoric and classroom reality. I can attest that techniques from most of the approaches described by CELCE-MURCIA (2001b), in particular grammar-translation and audiolingualism, are alive and well in language classrooms around the world.

Some years ago, I carried out a large scale investigation into the impact of the emergence of English as a global language on policy and practice in seven countries in the Asia-Pacific region. I concluded from the study that while, at a ministerial level, all countries espoused principles of CLT and TBLT:

“[…] in all the countries surveyed it would seem that rhetoric rather than reality is the order of the day. Poor English skills on the part of teachers as well as inadequate preparation make it very difficult, if not impossible, for many teachers to implement CLT in their classrooms” (NUNAN 2004: 608).

1.2 Defining TBLT

Tasks have been defined in various ways. One of the earliest definitions to appear was that offered by LONG (1985: 89):

“[…] 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, talking a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, finding a street destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by ‘task’ is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between.”

This is an example of what I have called a ‘real-world’ or ‘target’ task, that is a communicative event that takes place outside of the classroom. Tasks that are couched in classroom terms are called pedagogical tasks. In the following quote, for example, the context is conceived and presented in classroom terms.

“[…] an activity or action which is carried out as the result of processing or understanding language (i.e. as a response). For example, drawing a map while listening to a tape, listening to an instruction and performing a command may be referred to as tasks. Tasks may or may not involve the production of language. A task usually requires the teacher to specify what will be regarded as successful completion of the task. The use of a variety of different kinds of

4 Like many others, I have difficulty with the term ‘real-world’, implying as it does that the classroom is in some ways ‘unreal’. This of course, is a misconstrual. Classrooms have their own reality. However, I have yet to come up with an alternative way of describing the non-classroom world.
tasks in language teaching is said to make language teaching more communicative […] since it provides a purpose for a classroom activity which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake” (RICHARDS/PLATT/WEBER 1986: 289).

In my 2004 book on TBLT, I took a pedagogical perspective on task, suggesting that it was “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” (NUNAN 2004: 4). I also argued that it should have a sense of completeness. In other words, while it would be chained to other tasks in a pedagogical sequence, it ought to be able to stand alone in its own right, with a beginning, a middle and an end. Notwithstanding the pedagogical focus, classroom tasks should have some sort of relationship to target tasks. In other words, teachers and learners should be able to see how skills developing in the classroom could be deployed outside the classroom.

SKEHAN (1998), drawing on a number of other writers, offers five key characteristics of a task.

- meaning is primary
- learners are not given other people’s meaning to regurgitate
- there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities
- task completion has some priority
- the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.

1.3 Principles

In this section, I set out and briefly describe five key principles underpinning TBLT (NUNAN 2013a: 457). Some of the issues underlying these principles will be taken up and elaborated upon in the final part of the paper.

1.3.1 The point of departure for developing courses and materials is an inventory of learner needs rather than an inventory of phonological, lexical and grammatical items

Traditional approaches to syllabus design are ‘language centred’. The designer begins by selecting and sequencing phonological, lexical and grammatical items as the basis for curriculum design and materials development. TBLT, on the other hand, is ‘learner-centered’, in that the designer begins with lists of the kinds of communicative tasks that the target learners will need to perform. Specifying language content is a second order activity that is carried out with reference to the inventory of target tasks.

1.3.2 Learners develop the ability to communicate in a language principally through using the language rather than memorizing discrete linguistic items

The approach to pedagogy is performance-based rather than knowledge-based. Learners acquire skills by practicing those skills in class rather than memorizing vocabulary
and grammatical rules. This notion of learning through doing is fundamental to experiential approaches to learning. As I will demonstrate in the next section, experiential and constructivist approaches to learning provide a powerful theoretical rationale for TBLT.

1.3.3 **Personal experience forms the departure point for the learning**

Another principle of constructivism and experiential learning is that the learning process begins with what the learners already know. Learning is a process of building bridges between the known and the new. New knowledge and skills are incorporated into existing knowledge and skills which are also transformed. At a time when behaviourism was the dominant theory in educational psychology, Piaget (1955) developed the concepts of assimilation and accommodation. Children alter what they perceive of the outside world in order to assimilate new knowledge into pre-existing knowledge structures. When external knowledge can not be fitted into existing mental schemas, these must change to accommodate the new knowledge.

1.3.4 **Learning process and strategies are as important as language content**

Learners not only engage with language content, but are also sensitized to the processes and strategies underlying their learning. This is achieved through the incorporation of learning strategy training into instruction. (Strategies are the mental and communicative processes learners deploy in order to acquire and use language.) Although strategy training is not an intrinsic or essential element in TBLT, there are good reasons for adding learning process goals to the curriculum. For learners who have been taught in classrooms subscribing to a transmission model of education and who may be resistant to experiential learning, strategy training will sensitize them to, and provide a rationale for, TBLT. Secondly, making explicit to learners the strategies underlying pedagogical tasks will, potentially, make them more independent, and therefore more effective language learners and language users.

1.3.5 **There is a systematic link between the pedagogical world and the experiential world outside the classroom**

Pedagogical tasks can be ranged on a continuum from ‘rehearsal’ tasks, to activation tasks. A rehearsal tasks is one in which, as the label suggests, learners rehearse, in class, the kinds of tasks that they will actually or potentially need to perform outside the classroom. With ‘activation’ tasks, the link between classroom task and target task is less evident. Regardless of the rationale for any particular task (whether this be rehearsal or activation) the relationship between in-class tasks and target tasks should be clear to the teacher and, depending on their age and proficiency level, the student.
2. Theoretical roots

2.1 Constructivism and experiential language learning

A commonly drawn distinction in the educational literature is between transmission and constructivist/experiential models of learning. A transmission model is so called because the principle function of pedagogy is to ‘transmit’ input from the knower to the knowee. This model is aligned with knowledge-based curricula and declarative forms of knowing. Constructivist/experiential models, on the other hand, see the function of the pedagogy as arranging the learning environment to optimize opportunities for learners to acquire knowledge and skills through a creative/recreative process. It is aligned with procedural and performance-based curricula. In transmission classrooms, students learn by being told. In experiential classrooms, they learn by carrying out structured, and often self-organized activities.

These two models are not mutually exclusive. Rather they exist on a continuum. Assigning a learning arrangement to one or other model will depend on the principal focus and organization of the curriculum. A transmission classroom can have experiential activities embedded within it, just as an experiential classroom can have moments of transmissive instruction.

Experiential learning has been imported into language pedagogy from a number of other disciplines including social psychology, humanistic education, developmental education and cognitive science. In general education, the name most closely associated with the construct is David Kolb whose model rests crucially on a cycle of action and reflection.

In his model (KOLB 1984), learners move from what they already know and can do to the incorporation of new knowledge and skills. They do this by making sense of some immediate experience and then going beyond immediate experience through a process of reflection and transformation (NUNAN 2004: 12).

Turning specifically to the field of language education, the name most closely associated with the constructivist/experiential model is KOHONEN (1992). In my 2004 book on TBLT, I summarized his interpretation of constructivist / experiential learning in six precepts for pedagogy providing a solid rationale for TBLT. These are as follows:

- Encourage the transformation of knowledge within the learner rather than the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the learner.
- Encourage learners to participate actively in small, collaborative groups.
- Embrace a holistic attitude towards subject matter rather than a static, atomistic and hierarchical attitude.
- Emphasize process rather than product, learning-how-to-learn, self-inquiry, social and communication skills.
- Encourage self-directed rather than teacher-directed learning.
- Promote intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation.
The importance of fostering learner autonomy is central to the approach. In Kohonen’s own words:

“Experiential learning theory provides the basic philosophical view of learning as part of personal growth. The goal is to enable the learner to become increasingly self-directed and responsible for his or her own learning. This process means a gradual shift of the initiative to the learner, encouraging him or her to bring in personal contributions and experiences. Instead of the teacher setting the tasks and standards of acceptable performance, the learner is increasingly in charge of his or her own learning” (KOHONEN 1992: 17).

Legutke/Thomas (1991) have also made an important contribution to the literature on constructivism in language education. Although published over twenty years ago, the book still has a remarkable currency, and for this reader at least, provides new insights into communicative ‘paradigm shift’ every time it is read. Revisiting the book recently, I was struck by the point made earlier in this paper about the conservative nature of education, and the crepuscular nature of significant change. Legutke and Thomas open their book with a review of the CLT paradigm shift that had taken place over the preceding twenty years, yet here we are, twenty years on from the publication of their own work, contemplating the persistence of the ‘outmoded’ paradigm, as they call it. Knowledge-based curricula and transmission teaching are alive and well in many parts of the world.

There has been considerable speculation on this state of affairs. Teachers continue to teach as they have been taught, rather than as they have been taught how to teach. There is safety in the old way of doing things. The old adage, “Do as I say, not as a do” could well be turned on its head. Two other powerful forces militate against change in the language classroom. The first is the limited target language proficiency of teachers in many parts of the world, which results in English lessons delivered almost exclusively in the students’ own language. The second is pressure from parents (also from students themselves), whose minds have been firmly set by traditional modes of instruction, and who often seem experiential teaching as ‘merely playing games’.

2.2 Synthetic versus analytical learning

In the mid-1970s, a slim book appeared that was to have a significant effect on my own thinking and the thinking of many other teachers. The book was Notional Syllabuses by David Wilkins (Wilkins 1976). While acknowledging that syllabuses and proposals for pedagogical action come in many guises, Wilkins argued that these could be allocated to one of two camps. Synthetic syllabuses are language focused. The point of departure for the syllabus designer is to break down the three language subsystems of sounds, words and grammar into their component parts. The task for the learner is to master these elements and reassemble or ‘synthesize’ them. Analytical syllabuses take their initial bearings, not from the language but the learner. The point of departure for the syllabus designer is a list of the kinds of things that learners want to do with the language. The label given to these approaches is ‘analytical’ because learners are con-
fronted with naturalistic chunks of language and make sense of the language through a process of analysis. As WILKINS put it:

“Prior analysis of the total language system into a set of discrete pieces of language that is a necessary precondition for the adoption of synthetic approach is largely superfluous […] Analytical approaches] are organized in terms of the purposes for which people are learning language and the kinds of language that are necessary to meet these purposes” (ibid.: 13).

Analytical syllabuses come in many shapes and forms: task-based language teaching, content-based instruction, thematic syllabuses, and text-based syllabuses all belong to this broad category. Despite their differences, they all take as their point of departure something other than the prior analysis of linguistic subsystems. Such analysis occurs as a second-order activity.

2.3 Mastery versus ‘organic’ learning

Mastery learning was an approach to the design and delivery of instruction by Benjamin BLOOM in the 1960s (see BLOOM 1968; 1985). The basic premise behind the approach is that the effectiveness of learning will be maximized if a body of content is broken down into its basic constituents or units. These are sequenced in an order dictated by the nature of the subject, and each component is taught separately and one by one. Objectives are couched in behavioural terms, and learners are not allowed to proceed from one unit to the next until they have demonstrated mastery of the one that precedes it.

It is clear that, in relation to language acquisition, mastery learning sits very comfortably with the synthetic approach described in the preceding section. The main difference is that the synthetic approach focuses more on syllabus design than on pedagogical action in the classroom. Mastery learning deals both with syllabus design (selecting and sequencing content), and one aspect of methodology (the imperative not to move from one instructional unit to the next until mastery of the prior item has been achieved).

In general education, mastery learning has been criticized for its behaviourist basis, and the fact that it leads to narrowness rather than breadth. While the approach might work reasonably well for subjects such as mathematics in which concepts are institutionally scaled, it does not work well for language acquisition. It is also incompatible with TBLT.

A central problem in applying mastery learning to language pedagogy is that it rests on a metaphor that does not reflect the reality of language acquisition. This is what I have elsewhere called an architectural metaphors, in which hierarchically arranged learning units are taught separately and one-by-one. The problem is that language learners do not acquire one item perfectly one at a time, they learn numerous items imperfectly simultaneously.

Elsewhere (NUNAN 1999), I have argued that an ‘organic’ metaphor more accurately captures the reality of language learning. The adoption of an ‘organic’ perspec-
tive can greatly enrich our understanding of language acquisition and use. Without such a perspective, our understanding of other dimensions of language such as the notion of ‘grammaticality’ will be piecemeal and incomplete, as will any attempt at understanding and interpreting utterances in isolation from the contexts in which they occur. The organic metaphor sees second language acquisition more like growing a garden than building a wall. From such a perspective, learners do not learn one thing perfectly one item at a time, but learn numerous things simultaneously (and imperfectly). The linguistic flowers do not all appear at the same time, nor do they all grow at the same rate. Some even appear to wilt, for a time, before renewing their growth. The rate and speed are determined by a complex interplay of factors (NUNAN 1999: 109).

2.4 Learning processes

As CLT began to evolve, it became clear that the ‘language as body of content’ was an inadequate way of conceptualizing language. In addition to the notion that language is a body of content to be mastered, it is also a set of procedures to be deployed in order to facilitate effective communication. In other words, language is process as well as product. In pedagogy, this enriched, and more sophisticated view of language, needed to be reflected, not only in methodology, but also in syllabus development. In fact, a clear separation between syllabus design (the selection and sequencing of content) and methodology (the selection and sequencing of learning experiences) is increasingly difficult to sustain (BREEN 1987).

3. Empirical basis

In this section, I take a selective look at some of the research that has informed TBLT. I begin with research into learning styles and strategies before turning to the construct of communicative competence.

3.1 Learning styles and strategies

Styles and strategies matter to TBLT researchers for a number of reasons. In the first place, as I have already indicated, despite the fact that it has been around for almost 30 years, TBLT remains a source of mystery for many teachers around the world. The same goes for language learners, particularly those whose pedagogical reflexes have been conditioned in transmission classrooms. Secondly, in strategic and process terms, the end focus of TBLT is on making connections between the classroom world and the experiential world, and in developing the autonomy of the learner to function independently in the experiential world. Thirdly, knowing how strategies are deployed by different kinds of learners can provide useful pointers to pedagogical practice. For example, if we know what successful learners do to succeed, perhaps this can help us in designing appropriate strategies for less effective learners.
Learning strategies have been defined as the mental and communicative procedures learners use in order to learn and use language (NUNAN 1999). Learning styles, on the other hand, are the general orientations to the learning process exhibited by learners. In empirical terms, key questions addressed by researchers interested in the relationship between learning strategies and second language acquisition include the following: (1) What is the relationship between learning strategy preferences and other learner characteristics such as educational level, ethnic background, and first language? (2) Do effective learners share certain strategy preferences? (3) What is the effect of strategy training on task performance?

3.1.1 The relationship between learning strategy preferences and other learner characteristics

A major focus of interest by researchers has been the relationship between strategy preferences and other biographical characteristics such as first language background, ethnicity, and level of education. One of the classic investigations in this area was carried out quite a few years ago now by WILLING (1988). Data were collected from 517 learners through questionnaire and interview. A number of findings emerged from the study. The most surprising of these at the time was that none of the biographical variables investigated correlated with learning strategy preferences. The most important single finding of the study was that for any given learning issue, the typical spectrum of opinions on that issue were represented, in virtually the same ratios, within any biographical sub-group (ibid.: 150–151).

3.1.2 The characteristics of the ‘effective’ language learner

The ‘good’ or ‘effective’ language learner has been the focus of attention for many years on the supposition that if we know what good learners do, then we can train poor learners to follow suit. One of the shortcomings of this supposition is that strategies are not connected to other aspects of the variables. There is, in fact, data to suggest that specific language learning strategy choices are connected to more general learning styles (WONG/NUNAN 2011). This research suggests that effective learners use strategies that are consistent with a ‘communicative orientation’, that they make significantly greater use of out-of-class opportunities than less effective learners, and that they enjoy languages and language learning.

3.1.3 Strategy training and task performance

While there have been several studies into the effect of strategy training on task performance, the results are somewhat varied. GREEN/OXFORD (1995) found a significant relationship between strategy use and language learning success. The most important factor in the development of second language proficiency was the active use of the language in naturalistic situations. NUNAN (1997) found that reflecting, self-reporting and
self-monitoring by university students led to greater sensitivity to learning processes over time, and an enhanced ability to see connections between language instruction and content courses taught in English. In a North American context, COHEN [et al.] (1995) and COHEN (1996) studied the impact of strategy training on a group of foreign language university students. In a formal experiment, explicit strategy training led to significantly better results on two out of three speaking tasks on the part of experimental groups. Finally, in a study reported in NUNAN (1999), strategy training had an effect on a number of key variables such as motivation and appreciation of the importance of strategies. However, the results were not uniform in that training worked better for some strategies than others.

### 3.2 Psycholinguistic mechanisms

At the risk of oversimplifying European and North American perspectives on TBLT, I would suggest that one point of difference, as TBLT evolved, was a focus in North America on psycholinguistic aspects of second language acquisition. In the 1980s, researchers working in this tradition, investigated relationships between task characteristics, learner interaction and acquisition. Researchers working in the psychometric tradition drew on the work of Stephen KRASHEN (1981; 1982) whose comprehensible input hypothesis provided a theoretical rational for much of their work. KRASHEN (controversially) argued that there are two mental processes operating in second language acquisition: conscious learning and subconscious acquisition. In order to use language effectively for communication, learners must draw on language that had been subconsciously acquired. The trigger for such acquisition was comprehensible input. In other words, learners acquired language when they understood messages in the target language. Consciously learned grammar rules were irrelevant to this process. “What kinds of tasks provided such comprehensible input?” researchers subsequently asked. The answer seemed to be “Those tasks that maximized opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning (otherwise known as modified interaction or conversational adjustments.” LONG (1985) argued that the relationship between conversational adjustments and acquisition was an indirect one, that comprehensible input constituted an intervening variable. The logic was as follows: The need for a speaker to make conversational adjustments is triggered by a signal of non-comprehension by the listener. The speaker has to adjust or reformulate his or her utterance to make it more comprehensible. If comprehensible input is the force behind acquisition, it follows that conversational adjustments promote acquisition.

SWAIN (1985; 1995) made the point that while comprehensible input is necessary, it is not sufficient for acquisition. Learners also need opportunities to produce the language. She gave her hypothesis the rather tongue-in-cheek label “The comprehensible output hypothesis”. Taken together, the input and output hypotheses evolved into the interactional hypothesis. According to this hypothesis:
“Language is acquired as learners actively engage in attempting to communicate in the target language. The hypothesis is consistent with the experiential philosophy of ‘learning by doing’. Acquisition will be maximized when learners engage in tasks that ‘push’ them to the limits of their current competence” (NUNAN 1999: 51).

3.3 Communicative competence

The concept of communicative competence provided both a theoretical and empirical underpinning to TBLT. Until the early 1970s, competence in a language was conceived of largely as linguistic competence. In their words it was seen in terms of master of the three linguistic systems: the phonological, the lexical, and the morphosyntactic. This was to change with the emergence of the construct of communicative competence, a term that was introduced by the sociolinguist Dell HYMES (1966; 1972). HYMES argued that in addition to mastery of linguistic systems, language users also needed to know how to use the language appropriately according to the communicative context within which they were functioning. Drawing on anthropology, he carried out and reported on a series of ethnographic studies that became known as the ethnography of communication. In 1980, CANALE and SWAIN elaborated on the work of HYMES, arguing that communicative competence could be characterized as the coalescence of three subsidiary competencies: grammatical competence, strategic competence and sociolinguistic competence. Later, a fourth, discourse competence, was added. Grammatical competence had to do with the ability to mobilize linguistic knowledge. Sociolinguistic competence referred to the ability to tailor the message to the content: how to say what to whom when and where. Strategic competence had to do with the ability to ‘manage’ conversation in terms of topic and speaker selection and change – how to get a word in edgeways, how to change the topic without causing offence and so on. Discourse competence referred to the ability to ensure that the conversation ‘hung together’, that is, that it was cohesive and coherent (Cohesion is a linguistic phenomenon, while coherence is a psycho-social phenomenon).

4. Key Issues and trends

In this section, I look at four issues and challenges that are currently preoccupying those who are engaged in teaching and researching TBLT. These are the issues of authenticity, content-based instruction, learning beyond the classroom, and performance-based approaches to language assessment.

4.1 Authenticity: text and task

‘Authenticity’ became a buzz word in the early days of CLT. Initially, it referred to input authenticity, that is the authenticity of the listening and reading texts that learners engaged with. More recently, output or task authenticity has also been given attention. In this section I shall deal with both types of authenticity.
Authentic texts are pieces of spoken and written language that are generated in the course of genuine communication between two or more individuals. They contrast with pedagogical texts which are produced specifically to provide input for teaching. Authenticity is a relative term. The minute any text is taken into the classroom it is ‘de-authenticated’ to a degree, and it is relatively rare for a text to find its way into the classroom without being doctored in some way. BROWN/MENASCHE (1993) argue that the authentic / non-authentic distinction is an oversimplification and texts can be ranged on a continuum from ‘genuine’ (originating in real life and imported into the classroom unchanged) through to ‘minimal / incidental’ (created for teaching with no attempt at verisimilitude).

4.2 Content-based instruction

Content-based instruction (CBI) has a long and healthy tradition in its own right. However, it shares many characteristics with TBLT, which is why I have included a section on it in this chapter. In CBI, instructional content is drawn from other subjects on the school curriculum. Despite the variety of approaches that are subsumed under the CBI label, they all share a “systematic linking of subject matter and language in the context of language activities” (DAVISON/WILLIAMS 2001: 57).5

As I have alluded to above, there are many different models of CBI. SNOW (2013) spells out three models that have evolved in the North American context: the immersion model, the theme-based model, and the sheltered model. These three models vary according to the setting in which it is implemented (second versus foreign language setting), the type of students that are served (language majority versus language minority), the instruction level (elementary, secondary or post-secondary), and the degree to which the course focuses on language or content. The immersion model developed in foreign language contexts, focuses on elementary and secondary levels and is heavily content focused. The theme-based model was also developed in foreign language contexts with elementary students (although it could also be deployed with secondary level students) and is language driven. The sheltered model can be found in both second and foreign language contexts with secondary and post-secondary students in institutions with both first and second language learners. “The term sheltered derives from the model’s deliberate separation of L2 students from native speakers of the target language for the purposes of content instruction” (ibid.: 441).

CBI and TBLT both take as their point of departure, an analysis of learners’ communicative needs rather than an analysis of the phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical systems. They are therefore essentially analytical rather than synthetic in orientation.

5 Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and Content-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) had its origins in North America. More recently in Europe, a variant entitled Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has become increasingly popular with the goal of facilitating multilingualism in children acquiring languages within the European Union.
4.3 Beyond the classroom

A growing trend in language education is to look beyond the classroom for opportunities for language learning and use. This trend has been stimulated by the emergence of English as a global language, aided and abetted by the ubiquity of technology. The trend itself has strongly reinforced the value of task-based approaches to language learning in foreign language contexts. In fact, it could be argued that for English, Chinese, Spanish, German, French, and, increasingly, other widely-used languages such as Japanese and Korean, that are supported by economic globalization and the large-scale migration and spread of native speakers of these languages, the terms ‘second’ and ‘foreign’ language are becoming increasingly problematic. In a recent study, NUNAN (2013a; b) was able to demonstrate that children as young as ten years of age learning in what is ostensibly a foreign language context (an elementary school in Seoul, Korea) carried out a wide range of authentic communicative tasks in English beyond the classroom, from attending English language churches, to engaging with other learners in English in online gaming sessions to chatting in English with relatives living in English speaking countries such as Canada and the United States.

4.4 Performance-based assessment

Another trend is a shift in focus from assessment of learning to assessment for learning. Along with this, there has been a shift from indirect to direct assessment, which has brought its own challenges. Indirect forms of assessment include test items such as multiple-choice, true false, and cloze exercises. They are so called because they do not provide direct evidence on the ability to communicate, whereas direct forms of assessment do. For example, taking a telephone message and passing it along to a third party, or presenting the pros and cons of a case in an oral presentation provide evidence, potentially at least, of the ability to perform communicatively beyond the classroom. The advantage of indirect assessment is that while it is low on validity, it is highly reliable. You will get the same scores on a multiple choice test regardless of who is doing the assessing. Direct assessment tasks, on the other hand are highly valid, but problematic in terms of reliability.

Direct assessments have several advantages. They make it easier for learners to self-evaluate, as there is a transparent relationship between what the learners are required to do in the assessment task, and what they will be required to do outside the classroom. Additionally, any pedagogical task can be turned into an assessment task with the addition of criteria for judging the performance, a feedback mechanism to the learner, and the requirement that the learner is required to perform the task independently, without the assistance and support of the teacher.
5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have set out to present a state-of-the-art account of task-based language teaching. I have traced the roots of TBLT in experiential, constructivist approaches to education, as well as in changing conceptions of language and language use that emerged in the 1960s, and grew strongly in the 1970s. I have also provided a selective review of some of the empirical research that has supported certain aspects of TBLT. In the 1980s, I wrote what I believe to be the first book-length treatment of TBLT (NUNAN 1989). In the years since, books, articles, doctoral dissertations, and conference presentations on TBLT have burgeoned. Despite all of this activity, the concept is still widely misunderstood, and is only slowly beginning to gain traction in the classroom. We should not be surprised at this. Those involved in curriculum research and development point out that significant educational innovations can take upwards of thirty years to become part of the fabric of pedagogical life (STENHOUSE 1975). As this review has sought to show, the concept itself has evolved over the years, and is only now beginning to challenge pedagogical orthodoxy. Its future evolution is anybody’s guess. In the final section of the paper, I looked at the key issues of authenticity (both of text and task), content-based instruction, learning beyond the classroom, and performance-based approaches to language assessment. It is my best guess that these issues will have an important bearing on TBLT in the foreseeable future.

Literature

ANTHONY, Edward M. (1963): “Approach, method and technique”. In: English Language Teaching 17, 63–57.


