

The strengths and weaknesses the Task-Based syllabus.

SM/15/01

Select one type of syllabus from the list below, and comment on its strengths and weaknesses.

Task-based syllabus

Show how the syllabus has been influenced by particular theories (and models) of both language and learning. Describe the teaching situation (or situations) which you believe is best suited to this type of syllabus. Outline the arguments for choosing this type of syllabus.

1. Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) emerged in the 1980s and continues to expand internationally (e.g. East 2012, Hui 2004, Cheng & Samuel 2011). However, the methodology is not without problems and criticism. This paper begins with an overview of TBLT and what a syllabus based on it would be, describing the theories underlying the methodology. It then analyses arguments surrounding the strengths and weaknesses of such a syllabus, before discussing suitable situations for implementation.

2. Task-Based Language Teaching

2.1 What is TBLT?

TBLT emerged within communicative language teaching partly in reaction to older methodologies such as audiolingualism (Seyyedi & Mohamed 2012) and the PPP method common in many modern classrooms (Ellis 2009: 225), and partly as a result of new findings in second language acquisition (SLA) (Ellis 2009: 239).

Though there are multiple variations of TBLT (e.g. Willis 1996, Skehan 1996, Long 2014), Ellis (2014) provides a useful overview of common features, stating that TBLT lessons;

- involve natural language use
- use real-world or pedagogic tasks.
- may be linguistically focused or unfocused
- include focus on form
- are learner-centred
- reject 'traditional' approaches such as PPP and grammar translation

(adapted from Ellis 2014: 106-7)

At the heart of TBLT is the *task*. There are a wide variety of task forms, but Ellis again identifies common features. He states that for tasks:

- a) the primary focus is on meaning
- b) there is some kind of gap
- c) learners use their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources
- d) there is an outcome other than a display of language

(Ellis & Shintani 2013)

In contrast to the aforementioned traditional approaches to language teaching, in TBLT the student is not expected to focus on a specific linguistic form to the exclusion of other forms, but to use all language at their disposal to complete the task as it is not by studying form but by "engaging in communication and task completion that progress takes place" (Skehan, 1998:260-1). TBLT provides the 'real operating conditions' Dekeyser (1998) sees as necessary to practise target features.

2.2 The Structure of a Task

TBLT tasks are varied, but it is the scaffolding of tasks that is key. A task is not a collection of loosely-related activities, but should consist of a *pre-task phase*, a *main-task phase*, and a *post-task phase* (Ellis, Shintani 2013: 141). I shall give a brief overview of these phases here.

2.2.1 The pre-task phase

The pre-task phase is for *strategic planning*, acquiring or activating previously-acquired knowledge (Skehan et al. 2012: 173). Examples include schema-building (Nunan 2004: 34), schema-activation (Beglar & Hunt 2002: 101), and task modelling (Ellis & Shintani 2013). Debate continues over how much pre-teaching is justifiable (Ellis 2014: 104), but at most this should be limited. *Input* must take place, but without explicit teaching of form. The underlying theory for this is that, as Willis (1996: 14) states, the more teachers attempt to control the language produced, the more learners become concerned

with form over meaning. If the teacher teaches a certain phrase or grammar point early on, students will likely use this to the exclusion of more suitable language. Fotos (1993) agrees, stating that explicit instruction attunes learners to form in subsequent language.

2.2.2 The main task phase

In this phase the teacher monitors and identifies gaps in knowledge and language needs. Meanwhile students complete the task, plan how they will report the outcome, and report. While group work is definitely common in TBL classrooms, it is not a critical factor. What *is* critical is the fulfilment of Ellis' 4 features of a task noted in section 2.1.

There are many categories of task, including *input* or *output*-based, *focused* or *unfocused* (Ellis 2014: 104), *one-way* or *two-way*, *open* or *closed*, and *convergent* or *divergent* (Long 2014: 241-242), allowing for fine control of details such as complexity and cognitive-loading.

2.2.3 The post-task phase

This is the language-focus stage, where learners analyse the outcomes of a task, evaluate it, and receive feedback. Here the language needs identified during the task are addressed.

The post-task phase is not necessarily the end of the TBLT lesson. Instead, a class may be a sequence of tasks (Willis 1996: 21), with one task leading to another.

3. What is a task-based syllabus?

A task-based syllabus has the *task* as the unit of analysis (Long 2014: 221), as opposed to items such as grammar or lexis, and is designed after a needs analysis of the students it is for. It is process-based, and using Nunan's (1988:5) criteria is a *broad* syllabus, considering methodology and task-selection as crucial to syllabus development. A true task-based syllabus has content specified in terms of tasks to be completed, not a structural syllabus that merely includes tasks, this being better termed *task-supported*

(Ellis 2009: 224). Tasks may be either real-world or pedagogic, but must have interactional authenticity (Ellis 2009: 227).

While there are various interpretations of what a syllabus is, Long's (2014: 205-206) criteria that syllabuses specify linguistic entities, course content, and the order these are taught is most useful for us here. Indeed, Long's writings on task-based syllabus design are some of the most recent and detailed treatments of the subject and this essay will draw heavily on his ideas. However, the sometimes contrasting opinions of other TBLT researchers will also be addressed.

We should now look at the underlying theories of the task-based syllabus.

3.1 Theories of language and learning

Richards and Rodgers (2001: 226-227) identify 4 theories of language underlying TBLT. These are that a) language is primarily a means of making meaning, b) TBLT can be structural, functional, or interactional, c) lexical units are central to language, and d) conversation is the keystone of language acquisition. Though issue may be taken with these points, this is an apt summary and one we should be content with here for it is in the soil of language learning theories that TBLT grows.

A task-based syllabus is sometimes described as a procedural syllabus¹, with works such as Prabhu's (1987) given as early examples of TBLT. However Prabhu's work, a major influence on early TBLT thinking, no longer fulfils the criteria that has developed within the pedagogy. As with TBLT, procedural syllabuses focus on the *how* of learning, not the *what*, but procedural syllabuses aim to develop grammatical competence *through* tasks (Long 2014: 216), an approach better termed 'task-supported.' In TBLT the completion of the task *is* the goal, and a TBLT syllabus encourages negotiation of meaning to develop linguistic knowledge (Carter & Nunan 2001: 153).

¹ For example, in unit 6.4.1 of the University of Birmingham's *Syllabus and Materials* module 2017

Additionally, TBLT rejects the theory that declarative knowledge automatically becomes procedural knowledge given time. Rather, it is based on theories such as Pienemann's (1998) processability theory, which states that learners reformulate language as they progress.

Ali Shehadeh in Edwards & Willis (2005: 21-25) describes 2 hypotheses linking TBLT and language learning important to our discussion here, the interaction hypothesis and the output hypothesis. The interaction hypothesis emphasises negotiation of meaning between learners as a prerequisite for learning, and developed from works such as Krashen's (1982) "acquisition-learning distinction" and Long's "focus on form" (Long 2014: 27), which states that learner attention should be drawn *reactively* to linguistic problems, in context. The output hypothesis, meanwhile, views output as not only evidence of learning, but as a process of learning itself (Edwards & Willis 2005: 21). These two hypotheses are important foundations of TBLT, which encourages both output and negotiation of meaning.

4.0 Arguments for a task-based syllabus

I shall now comment on the strengths of a task-based syllabus, some previously touched on in the sections above, linking them to the theories behind the methodology.

4.1 Addressing developmental sequences

Evidence suggests languages are learnt in developmental sequences, where one stage of acquisition must be achieved before the next (Saville-Troike 2006: 76). However, the structure of these sequences remains unclear, and their existence does not mean classes should be based on mastery learning. Students do not acquire items in perfect sequence, but learn numerous items imperfectly and in an unstable sequence (Nunan 2004: 11).

A strength of task-based syllabuses is that they provide opportunities for students to use *their language at their stage of development*, as most SLA research indicates that language learning is learner internal, not external (Edwards & Willis 2005: 15).

Conversely, there is no evidence that grammar-focused activities used in many language classrooms reflect natural language acquisition outside the classroom (Richards and Rodgers 2001: 223).

4.2 Focus on form

The point that structural syllabuses “trivialise grammar” was made by Willis (1990: 7) when proposing the lexical syllabus, another syllabus born from SLA research though not widely adopted. This idea was brought into TBLT by Willis himself. The understanding that language learning is more complex than learning grammar forms one by one in an additive approach is a major strength of task-based over traditional syllabuses (Willis 1996: 177). Language is not seen as learnt by a focus on forms, but by a sequence of hypotheses checked and reformulated as learners progress (Willis & Willis 2007: 177). Task work provides a setting for these reformulations to be carried out.

4.3 Authenticity

Authenticity is crucial in TBLT, and tasks should create the same interactions as naturally occurring language (Ellis 2009: 227). Willis & Willis (2007) give a 3-tiered system of authenticity for tasks, from producing meaning useful in the real-world to actual real-world language. There should be no artificial language constructs. Within a TBL lesson you would not expect to hear students drilling “I am a student, he is a student, they are students” or struggling to transfer a written hypothetical into the pluperfect in the way you might in a classroom that teaches form before meaning, something that *would never occur outside the classroom*. Instead, students experiment with various methods of communicating meaning in the same way as during real-world interactions.

TBLT permits, though does not demand, the introduction of samples of real-world language i.e. language not specifically developed for language teaching. These, used in conjunction with simulated examples, allow students to experience the differences

between artificial classroom language and language outside the classroom (Nunan 2010: 49), a major strength in promoting communicative competence outside the class.

4.4 Mixed competencies

Grammatical and functional syllabuses focus on the structure of language, hiding a huge part of what language learning is. Linguistic competence, or “knowledge of the language itself” (Hedge 2000: 46), is only one component of language ability. Students must be also pragmatically competent, strategically competent, and competent in discourse (Hedge 2000), considering factors such as register, nuance, and tone. These competencies can all be developed in a task-based setting. The TBLT syllabus helps students find their own ‘voice’ through the strategies they find most useful for expressing themselves.

4.5 Learner-centeredness

A TBLT syllabus is a learner-centred one. Rather than relying on the passive transference of knowledge from teacher to student, learning occurs through active engagement and reflection, termed “experiential learning” (Nunan 2004: 12). Learners learn how to process and transform information by themselves, rather than waiting for an externally provided answer.

Tasks may also be tailored to learner interests, though care must be taken to ensure the level of complexity remains appropriate, promoting the communicative aspect of language and minimising the likelihood of students having strong receptive but poor productive skills.

4.6 Linking communicative meaning with linguistic form

In methodologies such as audiolingualism and PPP learners are typically presented with an isolated grammar item which they practise *before* using communicatively. While there are benefits to this approach, including providing students with a firm grasp of the language before production, the downsides are many. Such an approach often leads to students who produce the ‘correct’ language in the classroom yet are unable to produce

the language in more natural situations later on. In TBLT, students have usually seen, heard, and spoken such language in a communicative setting *before* analysing the linguistic elements (Nunan 2004: 32), allowing them to place it within a meaningful context.

4.7 Variety with structure and naturalistic recycling

Task-based syllabuses provide a lesson template with the routine students need to learn language efficiently but with enough variety to maintain motivation and interest. Tasks are “realistic communicative motivators” (Skehan 1996: 42). Students need to know what to expect in their class to reduce anxiety and to lessen cognitive load, but require variety to maintain interest. Furthermore, throughout varied tasks grammatical and functional points reappear numerous times, providing opportunities for students to restructure them in various contexts. Long (2014: 30) terms this “naturalistic recycling.”

4.8 Learning to live with error

The nature of TBLT means that students *will* make mistakes in the classroom and should expect attention to be drawn to errors after performing a task (Skehan et al. 2012: 174). This normalisation of error in the classroom lessens anxiety and promotes fluency and experimentation, while encouraging self-initiated error correction has been seen to result in significantly more language uptake and noticing of gaps in knowledge than other methods such as recasts, at least in some contexts (e.g. Sato 2012).

The importance placed on this feature may vary depending on factors such as location, personalities, and language institution, but in certain contexts can be vital. Japanese students, for example, may be notably reticent in speaking for fear of ‘failure,’ as seen in studies such as Cutrone’s (2009), Fuji & Mackey’s (2009), and in my own personal experience in a number of institutions around the country. The concern is valid for any classroom in any geographical location, however, and the reduction of foreign language anxiety ought to be a goal for any language-based syllabus.

4.9 Specific purposes

A task-based syllabus is useful for students studying for specific purposes. In Long's 2014 book alone, examples are given for job-hunting (p.20), buying a car (p.133), taking telephone messages (p.211) and more. It is notable that these examples could equally be found within a functional syllabus, but as we have seen there are significant differences between the two.

5.0 Arguments against a task-based syllabus

We have seen a long but by no means exhaustive list of strengths, and now must address arguments describing the weaknesses of a task-based syllabus.

5.1 Theoretical underpinnings

In section 4.1 we saw TBLT's basis in SLA research as a strength. However, this is only if the theories underlying such research are accepted. This is not always the case. For instance, Swan (2005: 376) states that there is no empirical evidence for the benefits of 'focus on form.' Such concerns go far deeper than only TBLT, with critics of Krashen's theories of acquisition and his related Monitor Model being numerous (e.g. Liu 2015). While we cannot address these here, it is important to remember that the SLA theories on which TBLT is based may be shaky foundations. Even Ellis (2014: 113) is forced to concede that, as yet, there is insufficient evidence to satisfy the doubts of TBLT critics.

5.2 Difficulties with lower-level students

The idea that low-level students perform a task through the use of their limited language resources raises serious concerns amongst many. Littlewood (2007) records several accounts of problems implementing TBLT in low-level EFL classrooms, with language impoverished or avoided altogether. In response Ellis (2014: 108) shows that input-based tasks can and have been used successfully in the past for even 6-7 year-old absolute beginners, and therefore the issue may be one of incorrect implementation, addressed in 5.5, rather than of inherent problems with TBLT.

5.3 The complexity of the methodology

The reality is that TBLT is an extremely complex methodology, not within the ‘comfort zone’ of most teachers (Long 2014: 7), who may want to feel “they have covered the ‘building blocks’ of a language” (Hedge 2000: 346). TBLT does not allow for this systemised approach. Approaches like PPP offer not only a strong controlling role for teachers, but significant pre-emption of what is going to occur. Littlewood’s (2007: 244) investigation of East Asian classrooms notes teacher fears over their own perceived lack of proficiency in both TBLT *and* language. It can be daunting for teachers to accept the ‘facilitating’ role TBLT requires.

Furthermore, the preparation of a task-based syllabus is time-consuming and psychologically demanding. A study in China found that 68.2% of teachers said TBLT increased preparation time, and 37.9% found it a significant psychological burden (Xiongyong & Moses 2011: 296). Task phases must be carefully constructed, and teachers must anticipate multiple outcomes. Inexperienced teachers may rightly fear encountering language points they cannot explain, whereas alternative methods allow teachers to choose beforehand exactly what will be used in class. Methods like PPP are relatively easy to learn, and indeed the entry-level Cambridge CELTA and Trinity TESOL courses both teach PPP to prospective language teachers, though in recent years have gone to some lengths to avoid mentioning it by name (e.g the Trinity College TESOL syllabus 2016). A decade ago this was my own entry into the industry, and provided a stable foundation on which to build.

5.4 Cultural-loading

TBLT may reflect a ‘western’ view of teaching, and opposition to the method has been described in international studies (e.g. Carless 2012). Separating cultural anxiety from learner/teacher anxiety as described in section 5.3 is difficult, however, but in regions where the role of teacher and student is clearly delineated the blurring of those boundaries may create issues.

5.5 Incorrect implementation

It seems clear that, as alluded to previously, TBLT is simply *not being implemented correctly* in many contexts, and examples abound of TBLT introduced in name only. A study in Iran (Nahavandi & Mukundan 2012) found teachers unclear as to what TBLT was and consistently making grammar-oriented interventions despite the claim that a task-based approach was followed. The previously mentioned study in China (Xiongyong & Moses 2011: 295) found that 48.5% of teachers incorrectly believed a task to be “an activity where the target language is used by learners.” We even see the PPP method 'masquerading' as TBLT (Wicking 2009: 248). The frequency of such misunderstandings reflects badly upon TBLT, and stems from inconsistencies within the pedagogy addressed below.

5.6 Inconsistencies within the methodology

TBLT suffers significant issues regarding what it actually *is*. Long (2014: 6-7), an early pioneer who first presented on the topic in 1983, laments the ‘dilution’ of TBLT from his original conception. Meanwhile, many claim Prabhu as the source of its popularisation, while as stated above Prabhu’s work should be regarded as a procedural syllabus, not a task-based one (Long 2014: 216).

Furthermore, it is unfortunate that Long’s terminology distinguishes *focus on form* from *focus on forms*, but other writers use the latter when meaning the former, leading to needless confusion. Long’s *focus on forms* describes the structural approach to teaching form before meaning, referred to as *form* in writings such as those of Willis & Willis. Problems in defining TBLT such as these give the impression of an approach that has been ill thought-out and is thus easy to dismiss.

6.0 Suitable situations for a task-based syllabus

6.1 Communicative classrooms internationally

TBLT is eminently suited to classrooms where the focus is on communication and meaning, regardless of whether the language being studied is the L1 of the learner’s country of residence or a foreign language. Whether a conversation school in London or

a university in Mexico, TBLT is one of the most suitable methodologies for developing communicative competence.

For those studying the primary language of their country of residence, task-based syllabuses prepare learners for the activities and negotiation of meaning they will encounter outside the classroom in daily life. For those studying a foreign language in their own country, task-based syllabuses create the opportunity for naturalistic, *authentic* language use that ordinarily would be unobtainable without travelling abroad.

Indeed, in my private language institute in Japan I have introduced TBLT in response to learner feedback that despite their relative proficiency with receptive skills, their inability to express themselves remains a frustrating issue. This inability stems not only from a lack of language ability, but from issues such as anxiety, a lack of confidence, and a lack of practice. TBLT focuses on language *and* factors such as these. The methodology is also, happily, viewed favourably by the owners and other financially-invested members of private language institutions such as mine, as it is very often the opportunity to *use* language and witness their own growing ability that keeps learners returning to the institution. There is, however, one major issue to consider, addressed in section **6.3**.

6.2 Problems with exam-focused institutions

A task-based syllabus may be regarded as unsuitable for institutions which 'teach to the test.' For example, in Japanese high schools the primary aim for English education is to pass mandatory university entrance tests. These tests, little changed for decades, do not contain a communicative component and consist primarily of translation tasks and ungraded reading (Kikuchi 2006). The popular TOEIC test, used by businesses to judge potential employees, also tests only reading and listening. Though there is some hope for the future, the fact that exams are not communicative in nature excludes a purely task-based approach from consideration, as methodologies that focus intensely on exam skills are likely to have greater success in their limited aims.

A synthesised syllabus, however, consisting of both task-based and structural lessons, may be acceptable for such institutions as the importance of the communicative aspect of language becomes increasingly acknowledged. Indeed, TBLT is being introduced in Japanese schools and universities, a response to student dissatisfaction with their proficiency despite 8 years or more of study (Wicking 2009). It is for this reason that I believe a task-based syllabus is becoming more and more suitable for institutions such as these, as the understanding of the importance of communicative competence expands. Again, a major qualification is discussed below in section **6.3**.

6.3 The importance of training regimes

The language teaching industry is vast and global, ranging from compulsory education to business courses, and from universities to language schools. While the 'task-based' label may be an increasingly popular selling-point, a task-based syllabus is only suitable for those institutions willing to invest the time and resources necessary to educate the educators, to build a staff who genuinely understand both the method and the theory behind the method. Unlike methodologies such as PPP, which can be structured to a syllabus with relative ease and even built into a textbook for teachers to follow, a task-based syllabus requires a nuanced understanding of its implementation. Quite simply, in the high-pressure and low-budget environment that is language teaching in many arenas, other tried-and-tested and easily understood methodologies may be more suitable, at least pragmatically.

7.0 Conclusion

There are many benefits to a task-based syllabus, developed in response to the varied problems encountered in traditional methodologies. However, these advantages are tempered by the fact that the TBLT is fraught with its own theoretical disagreements - though Long (2014) notes that TBLT often faces more criticism of its theoretical basis than established methodologies, despite these having less evidence to support them - and suffers from incorrect implementation worldwide.

It seems clear that for a large majority of schools whose primary concern is for students to be communicatively competent and to have a good grasp of form, a task-based syllabus would be an excellent choice. However, the reality is that only those institutions willing and able to ensure the methodology is correctly implemented, and the syllabus understood by both teachers and students, will benefit significantly from such a syllabus. For institutions where the goal of language teaching is not command of the language itself, but the attainment of a 'level' that can be categorically marked as achieved or failed through testing, the task-based syllabus will not be a safe choice until more research has been carried out into the results of such a syllabus on such specific goals. Research continues, with promising results, but the task-based syllabus structure used in different studies differs and will continue to do so until the methodology itself can be brought under a united definition of what it actually *is*. Perhaps then such a syllabus will be a safe and suitable choice for more institutions.

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