Using tasks in second language teaching. Practice in diverse contexts

Book

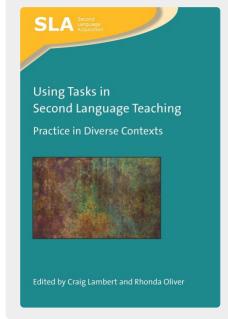## Using tasks in second language teaching. Practice in diverse contexts

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Abstract: Task-based language teaching (TBLT) emerged in the second language teaching context as a method that prepared learners for real-world language use by offering opportunities for speaking practice and meaning negotiation. Over time, tasks have also become increasingly popular pedagogic tools in the foreign language context, where opportunities for meaningful practice may otherwise be limited. However, some obstacles to the widespread implementation of TBLT remain, notably the limited availability of teaching materials and teacher training programs, and a certain reluctance to abandon traditional, grammar-based teaching practices. In this book, Lambert and Oliver present a selection of 17 papers dealing with a range of issues, from the formulation of general principles guiding task design to the description of TBLT curricula implementation in specific ESL and EFL contexts. The papers challenge some of the arbitrary assumptions preventing the adoption of tasks with younger and lower proficiency learners by proposing, for example, that the use of the first language (L1) does not always interfere with second/foreign (L2) acquisition, but can actually be beneficial for task performance, fostering meaningful L2 production. Overall, the book represents an exciting step forward towards bridging the gap between TBLT theory and classroom practice.

Keywords: task-based language teaching; task design; task performance; task-based assessment; international teaching contexts.

Task-based language teaching is an educational framework based on the concept of "task" as a meaningful communicative activity with a concrete outcome beyond the use of target linguistic forms. Unlike traditional drill and rote teaching methods, TBLT is supported by empirical research showing that tasks foster the kind of mental and interactional processes naturally occurring in incidental language acquisition, such as the negotiation of meaning through comprehension checks, confirmation requests and repetitions. As a result, only three decades after its inception, the TBLT educational framework has gained worldwide prominence among SLA researchers, language teachers and teacher trainers.

In spite of the popularity of TBLT, however, the use of tasks in the classroom has been hindered by a number of practical issues ranging from a lack of published materials to the clash with traditional beliefs regarding language teaching. In the book *Using Tasks in Second Language Teaching: Practice in Diverse Contexts* edited by Lambert and Oliver, leading TBLT experts investigate the implementation of TBLT in a variety of international contexts and offer an insight into the structural changes and the skills needed by teachers to find viable compromises within their specific context. Thanks to the use of accessible language and to an abundance of examples and evidence to support theoretical claims, including sample teaching materials and links to published resources, this book is as useful to the SLA researcher as to the pre-service and in-service teachers.

The introduction (chapter 1) helps the reader navigate the contents by highlighting the goals of each part of the book: Starting from an outline of the main frameworks and issues related to the use of tasks in part I, the focus shifts to the description of case studies on the adoption of task-based methodologies in challenging educational contexts in part II. I Finally, part III examines the effects of task factors such as the use of the L1 and learner pairing on task performance.

Chapter 2 introduces the crucial theme of how different TBLT theoretical frameworks cater to specific contexts depending on, for example, whether tasks may be expected to become the fundamental unit of the syllabus or are more likely to be used occasionally to support the grammar-based syllabus. The latter option, task-*supported* language teaching (TSLT), may be less intimidating than TBLT until teachers have accumulated a certain amount of experience. In view of this, Lambert offers practical examples of tasks and of their implementation implying that, although teachers interested in TBLT may in time become experts on a limited set of relevant SLA literature and be able to design full task-based curricula, they should be encouraged to experiment with integrating short tasks within their typical lesson-plans first. In chapter 3, Newton and Bui point out that teachers' reluctance to adopt TBLT with low-proficiency learners is unsurprising, given the traditional focus of TBLT research on speaking tasks carried out by adult, second (not foreign) language learners of intermediate to advance proficiency. Despite a lack of TBLT resources for beginner learners, however, the authors argue that tasks are beneficial for low-proficiency learners and illustrate a set of evidence-based general guidelines that may be applied to virtually any teaching context. An equally interesting set of principles is presented by Kelly (chapter 4) in their review of task design strategies aimed at fostering interaction, learner engagement and enjoy-ment of the language learning process. The principles, illustrated with examples taken from one of the ~~many~~ textbooks created by the author, are intended to guide teachers approaching task design for the first time or seeking to improve their task design skills. In chapter 5, the focus is narrowed down to technology-mediated tasks, such as multiplayer online games and

collaborative blog writing, and their potential for the development of intercultural competence. González-Lloret reviews the main strands of SLA research on technology-mediated tasks, identifies possible issues teachers may face when using them in the L2 classroom, and gives recommendations for task design and integration in the curriculum. Chapter 6 offers a unique socio-political perspective on the incompatibilities of TBLT with an educational environment shaped by neoliberalism, where education is conceived as an industry regulated by economic principles. Taking the Australian context as an example, Norris argues that national standards, regardless of the background of each school, lead to a narrow focus on test-based accountability, which transforms teaching into simply delivering information to prepare learners for decontextualized and predictable assessments. Similar issues regarding the clash of TBLT with traditional testing and a grammar-based syllabus are discussed by Ellis (chapter 7) in relation to the Asian context, where TBLT has been mandated by the authorities, but insufficient structural change has been implemented to accommodate for it. The author illustrates how most problems can be solved by engaging teachers in pre-service and in-service training programs, and reviews the factors that make teacher education more effective.

Part II opens with a detailed report of a needs analysis (NA) conducted by Kobayashi Hillman and Long to identify the tasks typically carried out by foreign service officers in Japan, as well as the linguistic resources required for successful task completion (chapter 8). The detail-ed instructions provided will be of inspiration for teachers in charge of designing a task-based syllabus for groups of professionals, such as policemen, medical staff and flight attendants. In chapter 9, Oliver discusses the needs of Aboriginal, vocational students in Australia, and the tasks designed by their teachers to help them overcome communication barriers. Through a qualitative analysis of classroom practices and teacher beliefs, the author illustrates how tasks can help learners from rural and remote Australia not only achieve English proficiency, but also develop cultural awareness and gain access to employment. Adopting a similar ethnographic approach, Bogachenko and Oliver (chapter 10) identify some challenges connected with the implementation of TBLT in Ukraine, such as insufficient time, limited technological resources and teachers' inclination towards traditional grammar focused activities, but also some positive aspects, including teachers' openness towards "task-like" activities with non-linguistic outcomes and their intuitive awareness of learner needs. In the following chapter, Farias and D'Ely describe the design and implementation in a Brazilian elementary school of a task-cycle, intended as a series of closely connected pedagogic tasks aimed at preparing learners for a real-life target task. Despite the learners' limited proficiency, which may have prevented them from following the *task-as-a-workplan*, the teacher ensured successful *task-as-a-process* through regular interventions, both pro-active (before the task) and re-active (during or after the task). In line with the hypothesis, expressed in previous chapters, that teachers play a crucial role in the successful implementation of TBLT, Solares-Altamirano (chapter 12) investigates the effects of a training program in Mexico aimed at familiarizing teachers with the principles of TBLT through the type of ex-periential learning typical of the task-based approach. Insights from the participants' diaries and interviews showed that the course was successful, and that participants were aware of the importance of the factors identified by Ellis (chapter 7) as key for the development of teacher-preparation programs. Overall, the papers in part II reaffirm the importance of the role of teacher training in the dissemination of TBLT and envisage the creation of teaching material banks as possible solution to the time constraints and high workload experienced by teachers.

In chapter 13, Sato investigates how training learners to use collaborative strategies, such as clarification requests and comprehension checks, can increase the frequency of learners'

engagement in meaning negotiation during task completion, with positive effects on comprehen-sibility. Other factors influencing learning from the performance of collaborative tasks, such as the use of the L1 and learner pairing, are investigated in the following chapters. Ahmadian and Mansouri (chapter 14) report on an L2 writing study with intermediate Iranian learners of English who were allowed to use only the L1 or only the L2 during task planning. The results showed that using the L1 increased task engagement and reduced anxiety during task performance, in line with previous research showing that L1 use helps students access knowledge and solve language problems more effectively. Kim et al. take a further step and highlight the benefits of allowing learners to use not only the L1 but all languages in their repertoire, based on a case study of TSLT curriculum implementation with L1 Chinese L2 English learners of L3 Korean in the US (chapter 15). Chapter 16 and 17 focus on a related issue with interesting implications for the L2 classroom, namely the effects of pairing students from different backgrounds and proficiency levels on task performance and learning. Aubrey reports on the learning patterns and perceptions of a group of Japanese learners of English performing collaborative tasks either with another Japanese learner of English or with an English native speaker. Although inter-cultural exchanges were associated with a higher perception of learning and more accurate resolution of language-related episodes, speaking to a native speaker seemed to make learners feel less comfortable and even pressed for time when planning their turn. A similar issue is investigated by Imaz Agirre and García Mayo in their study on young Spanish L1 learners' participation in collaborative dialogue. Pairs selected by the researcher based on their matching English proficiency levels engaged in conversation more frequently than teacher- and student-selected pairs, and learner participation was more equal (less one-sided) for the research-selected pairs. Finally, Harris and Leeming (chapter 18) investigate teachers' predictions regarding the vocabulary items and grammar features elicited by three types of task ranging from a picture-description task with a predictable outcome to an open discussion task, as well as the errors more likely to occur during task performance. Designer intentions, teacher prediction and learner language use largely overlapped especially for the description task and to a lesser extent for the narrative task, lending support to the hypothesis that certain tasks can be specifically designed to accom-pany and enhance grammar-based lessons. Even when the learners did not incorporate the target vocabulary and grammar in their performance, focused tasks engaged learners in a way that enhanced their chances of noticing.

Just like the positive findings coming from experimental research have stimulated the adoption of task-based pedagogy in authentic educational settings, the investigation of TBLT in a diverse range of contexts has the potential to support its success worldwide. Lambert and Oliver's book provides inspiration for language teachers interested in implementing tasks in their own classroom, a process which in turn will help researchers accumulate evidence regarding TBLT implementation and determine the aspects that work well and those in need of revision.