

A Review of Issues about Teachers' Understanding of the Construct of Tasks in Task-Based Language Teaching

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Abstract

Despite substantive empirical evidence for the efficacy of task-based language teaching and learning (TBLT), research shows that the classroom implementation of TBLT has often met with mixed success. One of the key reasons is teachers' lack of understanding of tasks and unclear concepts of tasks and task design. It is these factors that the article focus on. In this article, an overview of key conceptual definitions of tasks, which is a core construct that underpins TBLT, is provided. This theoretical information provides a background for a subsequent discussion of teachers' challenges with task implementations and their conceptual understanding of task features. The article highlights the complex relationship between TBLT in theory

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and research and TBLT in practice when teachers reported having unclear concepts, misinterpreted some criteria of tasks and struggled with task complexity and task design. These constraints can impede their implementation of TBLT. Finally, the article concludes with a call for more research attention and suggestions on how to help teachers to develop knowledge and strategies for managing the practical difficulties in implementing TBLT through teacher education or professional development programs.

Keywords: task-based language teaching, understanding, the construct of a task

บทคัดย่อ

ถึงแม้ว่างานวิจัยจำนวนมากได้นำเสนอหลักฐานจากการศึกษาที่เกี่ยวข้องกับประสิทธิภาพของการจัดการเรียนการสอนภาษาโดยเน้นภาระงานเป็นหลัก งานวิจัยจำนวนหนึ่งกลับพบว่าการจัดการเรียนการสอนภาษาโดยเน้นภาระงานเป็นหลักนี้ยังไม่ประสบผลสำเร็จเท่าที่ควร สาเหตุหนึ่งเนื่องมาจากครูผู้สอนภาษา ยังไม่มีความเข้าใจอย่างถ่องแท้เกี่ยวกับแนวคิดพื้นฐานของภาระงาน บทความวิชาการนี้มุ่งเน้นความสำคัญของการออกแบบและการจัดการเรียนการสอนโดยเน้นภาระงานเป็นหลัก มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อนำเสนอแนวคิดและอภิปรายปัญหาที่เกิดจากความไม่เข้าใจของครูสอนภาษาเกี่ยวกับภาระงาน โดยผู้เขียนได้มุ่งอธิบายความหมายและองค์ประกอบของภาระงาน เนื่องจากเป็นพื้นฐานทางทฤษฎีที่สำคัญของการจัดการเรียนการสอนโดยเน้นภาระงานเป็นหลัก ตลอดจนอภิปรายถึงปัญหาที่มาจากความไม่เข้าใจในแนวคิดเกี่ยวกับภาระงานของครูสอนภาษา บทความวิชาการนี้แสดงให้เห็นถึงปัญหาเรื่องการขาดความเชื่อมโยงระหว่างความรู้ภาคทฤษฎีและการลงมือปฏิบัติจริงของครูสอนภาษา และได้เสนอแนะให้มีการศึกษาวิจัยเพิ่มเติมเพื่อช่วยแก้ไขปัญหาดังกล่าวจากความไม่เข้าใจของครูผู้สอนตลอดจนนำเสนอแนวทางเพื่อแก้ปัญหาดังกล่าวผ่านหลักสูตรการพัฒนาวิชาชีพครู

คำสำคัญ: การเรียนการสอนภาษาแบบเน้นภาระงานเป็นหลัก
ความเข้าใจ องค์ประกอบของภาระงาน

Introduction

Task-based language teaching (hereafter TBLT) is “an approach to language education in which students are given functional tasks that invite them to focus primarily on meaning exchange and use language for real-world, non-linguistic purposes” (Van den Branden, 2006, p. 1). TBLT evolved from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in response to the criticisms of CLT and is advocated as an alternative approach to form-focused instruction to second language teaching (Bygate, Norris, & Van den Branden, 2009b). TBLT helps reconcile the limiting features of both strong and weak form of CLT. Due to the distinctive underlying principles, the strong CLT emphasizes communicative interaction and denies grammar teaching whereas the weak version concerns grammar-oriented pedagogy rather than communicative practices (Klapper, 2003; East, 2012b). Thus, TBLT combines the two versions by embedding form-focused work within purposeful meaning-driven tasks. According to East (2012a, pp. 22-23), TBLT is “a logical development to the CLT paradigm that might address some of the apparent weakness of CLT”.

Since its emergence in the 1980s, TBLT has been the subject of a large body of publications (e.g., Candlin & Murphy, 1987; Crookes & Gass, 1993; Ellis, 2003; Estaire & Zanón, 1994; Nunan, 2004; Samuda & Bygate, 2008; Skehan, 1998, 2011; Willis & Willis, 2007; Willis, 1996). Moreover, TBLT has

been supported by a large body of empirical research (Bygate, Norris, & Van den Branden, 2009a; Long, 2014; Shehadeh & Coombe, 2012; Shintani, 2016; Thomas & Reinders, 2015; Van den Branden, 2006) and aligns with theorizing in instructed SLA (Loewen, 2015).

Despite the evidence for the efficacy of TBLT, many studies have revealed that classroom implementation of TBLT has not always been successful. Teachers reported challenges with task implementations and one of the key reasons was their lack of understanding of tasks and TBLT. It was found that teachers' understandings and conceptions of TBLT did not fully accord with those in the mainstream literature (Cui, 2012). For example, teachers' understanding of TBLT seemed narrow as they conceptualised tasks as merely speaking activities involving pair or group work (Zheng & Borg, 2014). Moreover, teachers had a range of different conceptualisations of tasks. When they were provided with several theoretical definitions of task, they tended to operationalise tasks based on what worked well in their classrooms (East, 2018). Teachers also echoed the difficulty of designing tasks using the four criteria of tasks (Jaruteerapan, 2020). Thus, the research that has explored teachers' perspective of TBLT provided evidence of teachers' limited understanding of tasks and task components, which could possibly limit the adoption of tasks in the classroom.

For the purpose of this paper, it is important to understand what constitutes a task because it is a core construct that underpins TBLT. In the section that follows, I address key conceptual definitions of tasks and how the meaning of tasks has evolved over time.

The Evolving Definitions of Tasks

There are various definitions of tasks in the TBLT literature. Different scholars proposed a number of definitions of a task. When various attempts have been made to define the concept of task and TBLT, it inevitably leads to confusion. As Richards (2006) puts it, the notion of task is “a somewhat fuzzy one” (p. 31). According to East (2021), the complex scenario that task and TBLT “mean different things to different people” (Long, 2016, p. 5) possibly leads to the educational debates about what constitutes effective pedagogical practice. The review of literature shows the complex issue of how the meaning of tasks has changed over time. Early in 1985, Long generally defined a task in broad terms as a piece of work or the hundreds of things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between. Long’s (1985) early definition of tasks provides a lengthy description of task that reflects the real-world uses of language beyond the classroom (target tasks) and sometimes involves non-linguistic outcomes (i.e., a painted fence or a borrowed book). As Nunan (2004) notes, some examples in Long’s (1985) list do not even involve the use of language at all since they can be done without talking (e.g., painting a fence). However, when Long (2016) has refined the meaning of tasks, his recent definition relates more to pedagogical tasks used in the classroom for academic purposes (e.g., writing a lab report, or attending a graduate-level economics lecture).

In contrast to Long’s (1985) early definition, Nunan (1989) provided the meaning of a task which is more relevant to a communicative classroom. Nunan (1989) defined a task as a piece of classroom work that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, produce or interact in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than form. Then, Willis (1996)

came up with a shorter version of tasks. She defined tasks as “activities where the target language is used by the learner for communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome” (p. 53) . Then the definitions in the late 1990s and beyond started to focus on communicative purpose (East, 2021).

For example, Skehan (1998) synthesised the task construct and proposed that a task is: an activity in which meaning is primary; there is some communication problem to solve; 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 (p. 268). Additionally, Bygate et al. (2001) suggest that the definitions of tasks vary and depend on the purposes for which the task is used. They propose a core definition which can be modified and extended based on whether tasks are used, for example, for research or pedagogic purposes. Ellis (2003), on the other hand, argues that we need a generalized definition that can be used to specify common characteristics of tasks. In the same vein, Bygate and Samuda (2008) see it necessary to establish a widely agreed definition in order to distinguish between tasks and non- tasks. Ellis (2003), therefore, proposed the following six important features of a task, as a way to evaluate the extent to which an instructional activity is a task.

1. A task is a work plan for learner activity.
2. The primary focus is on meaning. To this end, a task will incorporate some kind of gap (i.e., an information, reasoning, or opinion gap) to motivate learners to use language to communicate meanings.
3. A task performance reflects real world processes of language use.
4. A task can involve the four language skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening.

5. A task engages cognitive processes (which in turn influence language demands) such as selecting, reasoning, describing, distinguishing, etc.

6. A task has a clearly defined communicative outcome.

(Ellis, 2003, pp. 9-10)

Ellis's (2003) definition is widely accepted and shares common characteristics with most other definitions. It can be taken as representative of areas of general agreement (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). More recently, Ellis refined these into four definitional criteria as discussed in the next section.

Ellis's Four Definitional Criteria of Tasks

Ellis (2018) and Ellis and Shintani (2014) proposed the definition based on the criterial properties as presented below.

1. The primary focus should be on meaning. This criterion indicates that learners should be mainly concerned with encoding and decoding messages not with focusing on linguistic form. Learners take a role of language users using the same kind of communicative processes similar to those in the real world such as listening to, or reading a story, filling in a form, explaining and giving instructions.

2. There should be some kind of gap. An activity with a gap activates the need to use language in order to lose it such as the need to convey information, infer meaning or express opinion.

3. Learners should largely rely on their own resources (linguistic and non-linguistic) in order to complete the activity. In other words, learners are not "taught" the language they will need to perform a task, although they may be able to "borrow" from the input the task provides to help them perform it. It is noteworthy that being taught the language does not include the teachers providing some linguistic

starting point such as key vocabulary, an input for production tasks (priming).

4. There is a clearly defined outcome other than the display of language. In this criterion, learners are primarily concerned with achieving the goal stipulated by the activity, rather than using language forms correctly. Moreover, there is an outcome that results from completing an activity that works towards a communicative goal, rather than the display of linguistic knowledge. Thus, when performing a task, learners are not primarily concerned with using language correctly but rather with achieving the goal stipulated by the task.

Ellis and Shintani (2014) assert that these four criteria help to ensure that a task will provide a context where language is used and treated as a tool to achieve a communicative outcome. The criteria share common characteristics with most other definitions; a primary focus on meaning; a gap that motivates communication; and goal-oriented outcomes. However, what is unique in Ellis and Shintani's definition is criterion three where learners rely on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources. In other words, learners are not prescribed specific language they should use to perform a task. Instead, they can make their own decision to use whatever language available for them to complete the tasks (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). Interestingly, this criterion is what most teachers in Erlam's (2015) study found the most difficult to incorporate in the tasks they designed.

Overall, Ellis (2009, 2018) suggests that the four definitional criteria of tasks are more essential for distinguishing a task from a situational grammar exercise. For an instructional activity to be considered a task, all four of these criteria must be met (Lambert, 2018). Ellis values each criterion differently in terms of its importance. Earlier, Ellis (2003) paid more attention to the meaning-focused criterion as the key feature that most likely differentiates a task from a situational

grammar exercise. He argued that, "...some of the criteria are more important for judging whether an activity is a task than others. The key criterion is (1), the need for a primary focus on meaning" (p. 16). Six years later in his article in 2009, he included the criterion (4), a clearly defined outcome, as another key criterion. As he puts it,

On the basis of such criteria, a distinction can be made between a "task" and "a situational grammar exercise". Whereas the latter may satisfy criteria (2) and (3), it does not satisfy (1), as the learners know that the main purpose of the activity is to practice correct language rather than to process messages for meaning, nor does it satisfy (4), as the outcome is simply the use of correct language (p. 223).

Recently, Ellis (2018) has shifted his attention to another two criteria, a gap and a learner's own resources by arguing that,

My definition emphasizes the importance of a "gap" (criterion 2) to motivate the goal of a task and the need for learners to use their own linguistic resources (criterion 3) ... It is these criteria that are important for distinguishing a task from an exercise (p. 159).

It can be said that this set of criteria can be adopted as a basis to explore taskness and task-likeness in classroom activities. The distinction makes tasks become apparent among other language works such as form-focused language exercise. It then allows us to understand the extent to which tasks are incorporated in the lesson plans designed by teachers. Such

distinction is useful for teachers to choose the right pedagogical tool to suit different learning purposes.

Moreover, these criteria are based on the notion that not every activity will fully satisfy the four criteria, and some may have features of “taskness” without fulfilling all four criteria (Ellis, 2018) . Therefore, we can see different kinds of instructional activities as a task, task-like or a non-task when drawing on the four criteria. This approach will make the way we think about tasks more feasible in reality (Ellis, 2018; Ellis & Shintani, 2014). Although this set of four criteria provides a systematic way of distinguishing tasks from other language work, it was not without its problem. Teachers may not always able to apply all the four criteria to design tasks (e.g., Erlam, 2015). This challenge will be further discussed in the next section.

Challenges of Turning Criteria of Tasks into Practical Application

From a theoretical perspective, the four definitional criteria of tasks are useful in distinguishing a task from other instructional activities. However, in practice, employing these criteria is not necessarily straightforward. This issue highlights the complex relationship between TBLT in theory and research and TBLT in practice.

At the level of decision-making in analysing a task, it is not always easy to provide a clear-cut answer of whether the activity meets the criteria of tasks or not. Challenges come from the degree of ambiguity of some criterion. For example, the notion of meaning, there are different levels and types of meanings (e.g., propositional, semantic and pragmatic meaning).

We learn that a task should be meaning-focused. However, when we actually confronted with different types of meaning such as comprehending the messages in a reading text, writing an email message or listening to a conversation, decision-making can be difficult. It is neither a straightforward nor an easy undertaking to decide whether these activities are meaning-focused tasks or meaningful language practices (e.g., the activities have meaning potential but are not communication-oriented). Therefore, analysing a task against meaning criterion that is gradient, complex and multi-layered can be challenging.

Other criteria can also be problematic for some teachers. For example, student teachers in Jaruteerapan's (2020) study reported variable levels of understanding of the features of tasks. Two criteria that they had particular problems with were the "*outcome*" and the "*gap*" principles. They tended to think of a gap as something missing. In other words, to fill the gap, learners need to create sentences. In addition, they were less certain and treated the task outcome more broadly as a general learning goal, which does not fit the definition indicated in Ellis's (2009) criteria. A possible explanation why some student teachers did not do well on the "*outcome*" and the "*gap*" principles was because they might not clearly understand basic concepts that underpin communicative-oriented activities such as the need to convey information, to express opinion or infer meaning. Moreover, the word "*outcome*" can be misinterpreted by student teachers as any end-result of doing tasks or activities. Similarly, the often-missing features of the "*gap*" and the "*outcome*" is also reported in Peng and Pyper's (2019) study. Many activities claimed that tasks designed by teachers in their study often failed to meet these criteria. These examples show

that the concepts of task “*outcome*” and “*gap*” were not well understood by the teachers.

At the level of task design, the difficulty of the four criteria and a lack of comprehensive understanding of the task components can be challenging for teachers, particularly the new TBLT users. Again, student teachers in Jaruteerapan’ s (2020) study mentioned that planning a task-based lesson by themselves was difficult, especially when they had to draw on the four features of tasks. Although the student teachers had been introduced to tasks and practised designing task-based lessons, they still found it challenging to plan TBLT lessons. It was because they did not understand the concept of tasks clearly and so did not know how to choose activities for the task design. This includes the difficulty of creating and connecting the task criteria with the lesson content. Moreover, teachers in Erlam’ s (2015) study found the criterion “*learners rely on their own resources*” the most difficult to incorporate in their task designs.

Erlam (2015) suggests that this may be because the concept of own resources was not clearly understood by the teachers. At a more general level, she argued that the focus on output-prompting tasks also contributed to this problem since the tasks that the teachers in her study used were too difficult for the beginner students.

The accounts of teachers struggling with task designs reflect Samuda’ s (2005) point that, “Task design is a complex, highly recursive and often messy process, requiring the designer to hold in mind a vast range of task variables relating to the design-in-process” (p. 243). The challenges reported here have also been echoed by other studies. The findings of these studies point toward the issue of teachers struggling with task

complexity, confusing features of a task and task design (Brandl, 2009, 2017; Carless, 2004; Chien, 2014; Saputro et al., 2021; Van den Branden, 2006). Teachers had unclear concepts, misinterpreted some criteria of tasks (East, 2021; Erlam, 2015) and hindered teachers' adoption of TBLT (Jaruteerapan, 2020).

Conclusion

The evidence of teachers' challenges mentioned above highlights the theory-practice gap of how to turn theoretical construct of task into practical application. Samuda et al. (2018) call for attention to this gap:

We are very much aware that the challenges involved in putting TBLT principles into practice are considerably more intricate than appears to be recognized in much of the SLA-based TBLT literature, and that there is a gap here that needs to be addressed (p. 7).

This issue has also raised awareness and emphasized the need to pay more attention to finding ways to bridge the gap and mediate this complex relationship between TBLT in theory and research and TBLT in practice. As mentioned elsewhere in this article, teachers' limited understanding of the task construct and task design can impede their implementation of TBLT. Moreover, evidence from previous studies suggests that beginning teachers lack experience in devising tasks of their own (Jaruteerapan, 2020; Peng & Pyper, 2019) and that they need support in this process (East, 2018). To promote teachers' practices of TBLT, this article, therefore, proposes that it is necessary to provide them with opportunities to engage in both theoretical knowledge and practice-oriented training. Possibly,

this guided process of learning can be integrated as a part of teacher education or professional development programmes. As East (2021) puts it, teachers need to be “introduced to, and have opportunities to explore the task construct, both theoretically and practically” (p. 183). This point accords with Van den Branden’s (2016) comment that repeated practice along with interactional support and guidance can help teachers to overcome the doubts and concerns during the first stage of TBLT implementation. The potential value of the guided processes of learning to teach with TBLT was confirmed by other studies (e.g., Duong & Nguyen, 2021; Lai, 2015; Ogilvie & Dunn, 2010; Van den Branden, 2016; Zhang & Luo, 2018; Zhu, 2018). Teachers in Duong and Nguyen’s (2021) study reported having confidence about their understanding of TBLT as a result of regular training courses. They were, therefore, willing to employ tasks in their teaching practice. Clearly, the guided process of learning to teach can encourage teachers to use innovative practices such as TBLT. The proposal raised in this article is consistent with some of Ellis’s (2018, p. 272) suggestions for effective TBLT training. They are:

1. Training needs to be accompanied with actual tasks that teachers can use in their classrooms,
2. Teachers also need to be actively involved in designing and performing tasks as part of their training.
3. Training in the form of observation of actual teaching followed by feedback provides a means for encouraging reflection by teachers and of addressing practical issues that concern teachers.

Overall, to help teachers develop a deeper understanding of task concepts and task design, teachers need rich opportunities to engage in the development of task materials such as planning a task-based lesson plan. According to Ellis (2009), teachers require “a clear

understanding of what a task is” and need also to be “involved in the development of the task materials” (p. 241). This includes the provision of models or examples that teachers can use as a good starting point when they are left to their own devices. Practical experiences with tasks may contribute to the development of teachers’ understandings of TBLT.

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