Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has gained considerable momentum over the past thirty years; in some countries, like New Zealand and Vietnam, TBLT has even been propagated by the national government as the most favoured approach to second and foreign language teaching. International conferences are devoted to this particular approach, task-based syllabuses are being developed in a growing number of educational settings and tasks are used by researchers in studies exploring the processes that drive second and foreign language acquisition (SLA). In this chapter, I will first describe the basic principles of TBLT and provide a brief historic overview of its development. Next, I will discuss what a task-based curriculum looks like and discuss a number of critical issues and key areas of debate. I will then move on to discuss the implementation of TBLT by teachers around the world, exploring the potential and opportunities that working with tasks in the classroom can give rise to on the one hand and the difficulties and tensions teachers are facing when trying to implement TBLT on the other hand. At the end of the chapter, I will point out a number of future challenges related to task-based language teaching.

What is TBLT? and what is a task?

Historically, TBLT grew out of applied linguists’ and pedagogues’ discontent with the prevailing approach to second/foreign language teaching during the second half of the twentieth century. Long (1985) argued that in many second language classes, language was approached as a system of elements and rules which were explicitly taught in a piecemeal and decontextualised fashion. Learners were supposed to first digest the explicit information about a particular linguistic item (e.g. a word or a grammar rule), then practise the item in isolated sentences until its application had been automated; only then were learners encouraged to try and use the linguistic item in the exchange of meaningful messages for communicative purposes. Long argued that this approach to language teaching is largely inconsistent with the way people learn a language. Firstly, the language input that learners are exposed to is bound to be artificial, merely serving to illustrate ‘the structure of the day’ and failing to show learners how target language users really talk outside the classroom. Secondly, learners are typically asked to produce errorless output at a very early stage of acquisition (to show that they have absorbed the explicit information about the rule flawlessly), while normal processes of second language acquisition are gradual and
naturally involve errors that can even be informative and useful to learners. Thirdly, according to Long, there is a huge difference between practising a rule in isolated sentences (and being allowed to just focus on that single rule) and integrating the context-appropriate use of the rule with the application of a wide range of other sub-processes (such as mobilising the right words, pronouncing an utterance appropriately, monitoring the interlocutor’s reactions and so forth), which together constitute the complex challenge that second language learners face when making spontaneous conversation in the target language.

In natural, non-classroom-based processes of language acquisition (which typically can be observed with very young children acquiring their mother tongue or immigrants acquiring a language outside school, for instance when watching television, playing games, working or socialising in a second language context), people do not first acquire metalinguistic information about the elements of a language; rather, from the early developmental stages onwards, they intend, and therefore try, to comprehend and produce meaningful messages in the target language to achieve particular goals, many of which will be non-linguistic. Tourists at beginner levels who are travelling abroad, for instance, may be particularly eager to quickly pick up words and expressions they need to find a toilet, order drinks and food and find their way around; young adolescents who get absorbed in a fascinating digital game in a foreign language are equally eager to quickly acquire the language they need to play the game and talk about it; immigrants who have just found a new job in their new environment may be particularly motivated to try to comprehend/produce crucial messages related to doing their job well.

In India, Prabhu (1987) was one of the first to seriously explore this idea and organise a language-learning curriculum around a series of task-based projects (the ‘Bangalore Project’), which hinged on the basic hypothesis that people learn real and useful language more quickly if they try to use it for non-linguistic ends. Around the same time, Long (1985) and Pica (1987), amongst others, also coined the term ‘task-based’ in the United States. These, in fact, were not the first attempts to challenge the grammar-based, teacher-dominated, explicit approach to language teaching noted earlier. Drawing on pragmatic and sociolinguistic approaches to the study of linguistics, communicative language teaching (CLT) had been introduced in the 1970s, raising awareness among language teachers of the need to base language learning in communication (Widdowson, 1978; Brumfit and Johnson, 1979; see Thornbury, this volume). However, as Long (1985) argued, both in curriculum and syllabus design on the one hand and in classroom practice on the other, CLT (especially the ‘weaker’ forms of CLT) rapidly became incorporated into the mainstream explicit approach to language teaching; although many teachers and textbooks were inspired by CLT to extend the third phase of the present-practice-produce paradigm, neither the basic structure of classroom activity nor the linear, incremental, structure-based view on language acquisition underpinning it turned out to have been significantly challenged by CLT.

What the early proponents of TBLT aimed for was the reversal of the basic pedagogic model; language learners needed to be exposed to meaningful input from the very early stages onwards, try to communicate by using whatever limited linguistic resources they had already built up, focus on meaning rather than on linguistic accuracy and try to reach intrinsically interesting, personally relevant goals while doing so. From their attempts to understand and produce meaningful messages for functional purposes and the exemplar-based linguistic repertoire they were building up, learners were presumed to gradually induce explicit language knowledge. From this perspective, explicit, conscious knowledge about language is based on and stems from the implicit knowledge that learners build up while trying to make conversation, rather than the other way round. This resonates strongly with the original CLT baseline of using language to learn it, or as Hatch (1978: 63) put it, “language learning evolves out of learning how to carry on conversations, out of learning how to communicate.”
This brings us to the definition of ‘task’, the central concept in the TBLT-approach. As Table 17.1 illustrates, various definitions of ‘task’ have been proposed by different scholars over the past three decades, but all of them share a common core: a task is a goal-oriented activity that people undertake and that involves the meaningful use of language.

One fundamental question that proponents of task-based language teaching need to answer is how learners’ attempts to use the language can be integrated with learners’ (conscious or unconscious) attempts to learn a language. Don’t people need to learn language first before they can use it? How can you use something that you have not learnt yet? How can you comprehend and/or produce previously unlearnt linguistic items? As studies of first language acquisition and language acquisition outside school indicate (cf. Ellis, 2008; Bavin, 2009), to pick up new words and expressions and unravel their meaning, language learners can be greatly aided by the extra-linguistic context in which the communicative activity is integrated, by the linguistic context in which linguistic items the learner is unfamiliar with are embedded, and by the interaction with their teacher and fellow-students. The latter may be supportive in many different ways (Mackey and Goo, 2007). For example, learners can negotiate the meaning of difficult words and expressions with their interlocutors; in a similar vein, interlocutors may negotiate the meaning that the second language learner is trying to convey, hence ‘pushing’ the output of the learner. Thus, teachers and peers may react to the learner’s attempts at meaning-making in all kinds of supportive ways, for instance by recasting a non-target-like utterance in richer, more accurate, appropriate or adequate terms and in this way illustrating how the language works without interrupting the flow of the conversation. Or teachers may explicitly correct an error, scaffold learners’ problem-solving

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 17.1 Examples of definitions of ‘task’</th>
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<tr>
<td>Long (1985: 89)</td>
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<td>by ‘task’ is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between. ‘Tasks’ are the things people will tell you they do if you ask them and they are not applied linguists.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prabhu (1987: 24)</td>
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<td>an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process was regarded as a task.</td>
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<td>Nunan (1989: 10)</td>
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<td>a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is primarily focused on meaning rather than form.</td>
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<td>Willis (1996: 23)</td>
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<td>activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bygate et al. (2001: 11)</td>
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<tr>
<td>an activity, influenced by learner choice, and susceptible to learner reinterpretation, which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.</td>
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<td>Ellis (2003: 16)</td>
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<td>a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills, and also various cognitive processes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Van den Branden (2006: 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A task is an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective, and which necessitates the use of language.</td>
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</table>
by prompting, or briefly provide metalinguistic information on how a particular grammar rule works while the learner is having trouble understanding or producing an utterance in which the rule is activated (see Mackey, Park and Tagarelli, this volume, for further discussion of error, feedback and repair).

From the above, it can be inferred that an explicit focus on form is an integral part of a task-based approach. TBLT is sometimes misunderstood as an approach that begins and ends with mere ‘meaning-making’, in which all instances of explicit, metalinguistic teaching are principally banned. However, this view is inconsistent with the basic principle that TBLT aims to be a research-based pedagogy (Van den Branden et al., 2009): it aims to dynamically respond to whatever research has to offer in terms of what works in the language classroom. The position of focus on form in the TBLT approach is a clear example of this: a considerable body of empirical evidence has built up over the past twenty years that indicates that explicit teaching aids language learning, particularly when it is skillfully integrated with the performance of holistic, situated, purposeful and meaningful activity (cf. Norris and Ortega, 2000; Ellis, 2008; Long, 2009; Collins and Marsden, this volume).

What does a task-based curriculum look like?

The discussion above thus suggests that the learners’ language learning needs constitute the starting point for the development of a task-based curriculum. Most language learners aim or need to acquire the target language for functional purposes; consequently, their motivation to engage in classroom activity may be enhanced by linking classroom activity directly to the things they want to do with the target language in the outside world. Teachers may realise this link in different ways, such as incorporating authentic language material in the classroom, involving the students in negotiating the curriculum, working with semi-authentic tasks and using modern technology to give students real-life opportunities to use the language with native or expert speakers. Ideally, a fully developed TBLT programme would be structured via a full-blown needs analysis of the language tasks that learners need to be able to perform (Long, 2006; Norris, 2009).

Needs analyses are used to yield a list of essential target tasks which constitute the ultimate goals of the instructed language learning process in which the students are to engage. From the target tasks, a sequence of pedagogic tasks can be derived. Pedagogic tasks are more or less detailed scenarios (‘workplans’) for classroom activity which gradually present increasingly complex approximations of target tasks (Long, 1985; Long and Crookes, 1992). For example, second language learners enrolled in a L2 vocational course for immigrants aiming to find a job in administration who, amongst other things, need to develop the proficiency to place and handle all kinds of orders (e.g. through e-mail or telephone) may start out with a very simple version of the target ordering task. For instance, for a first stage, they might be asked to read a short written order from a customer for comprehension, and then to match the ordered items with pictures in a catalogue. In this early stage, students could be asked to do this task in pairs so that they can negotiate and support each other while performing it. Building on this basic task, all sorts of variations may follow in sequence, adding some degree of complexity pertaining to aspects such as the number and kinds of items that need to be ordered, the length and complexity of the message, the modality (written versus oral orders), the complexity of the situation (e.g. a wrong delivery that needs to be followed up), the interlocutors involved, the time pressure and so on. Meaning would be paramount throughout.

In the example above, learners work their way up from one task to the next. So, from the very beginning, classroom activity is task-based; however simple the vocabulary and grammatical structures involved in the first pedagogic tasks may be, students are still invited to exchange
meaningful messages (i.e. comprehend and produce them themselves) in an attempt to reach a communicative solution and a (simulated or real) non-linguistic goal. In this approach to language learning, students not only acquire language in order to use language to reach functional goals, they also do so while trying to achieve those goals. In contrast to task-based approaches, a task-supported approach does not take ‘task’ as the central organising unit of classroom activity from beginning to end. In the latter case, tasks are integrated within classroom activity to complement language-focused classroom activity. For instance, learners may be presented with the rules for forming comparatives and superlatives in English, practise these rules in isolated sentences first, and then spend the final quarter of an hour performing a task in which they are asked to compare authentic advertisements to decide upon the best buy (Ellis, 2003).

Even though task-based classroom activity can take different shapes and guises, a number of influential pedagogical guides in the field have introduced a three-stage model which consists of pre-task activities, the actual task performance and post-task activities (e.g. Willis and Willis, 2007). During the pre-task phase, teachers and learners typically prepare the task performance cognitively, socio-emotionally and from an organisational point of view. From a cognitive perspective, the topic or non-linguistic goal is introduced, and the learners’ prior knowledge (both content knowledge and useful linguistic knowledge) gets mobilised. In this stage, some teachers may ask students to rely on their own linguistic resources, while other teachers may present some vocabulary that will be useful or even crucial to perform the task at hand. From a socio-emotional point of view, the teacher will address students’ interest and task motivation and may also want to encourage students to speak out, take risks while producing output, and signal their non-understanding when trying to comprehend input. From an organisational point of view, the teacher will need to give clear task instructions and, where appropriate, put the students in groups. During the stage of actual task performance, students will be working on the task individually, in pairs or in groups (or a combination of both) and will discuss task outcomes and task performance strategies and deal with any obstacles they may meet; this may happen via interim whole-class discussions or personalised teacher-learner interactions or within their pairs or groups. It is during this stage that interactional support serves the crucial functions of dealing with students’ personal or shared misconceptions; responding to learners’ form-focused and meaning-focused questions; providing learners with feedback on the quality of their ongoing work and monitoring their progress; encouraging students to keep up the good work or persevere when tasks are challenging; and maintain students’ motivation, self-confidence, and task engagement. Finally, during the post-task phase, task outcomes will be reported and reviewed and task performance discussed as appropriate. Focus on form may be embedded in this stage, for instance when the teacher invites the students to practise specific rules or linguistic items that prominently featured in the tasks the learners performed.

In Table 17.2, two examples are given of task-based classroom activities that follow this three-stage structure. As both examples in the table show, task-based classroom work typically involves the integration of different skills. Students are invited to read articles, report back on them (orally or in written form) and discuss what they have read in groups, which entails listening and speaking, all during the same classroom activity. Task-based language teaching, then, is not necessarily compartmentalised the way more structure-based approaches to second/foreign language teaching tend to be, as, in real life, people also need to deploy different skills and knowledge in order to perform authentic tasks. In a similar vein, focus on form or strategies is integrated in the meaning-focused work. In a task-based syllabus, form follows function; explicit attention to form is primarily devoted to linguistic items that are deemed task-essential by the learner, by the teacher or both. While in a task-supported approach, tasks can still be used to practise the ‘structure of the day’, in a
Table 17.2 Examples of task-based classroom activity following a triadic component structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task 1: Safe passwords</th>
<th>Task 2: A new mobile phone?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pre-task</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Students debate the features of safe Internet passwords with the teacher and share thoughts on why safe passwords are important.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The teacher puts preliminary answers on the board and invites students to sit in groups of four.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The groups are each given a text that describes one feature of a safe password.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pre-task</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Students are shown a picture of a mobile phone with a broken glass screen and are told that this is how a phone they ordered online came out of the box upon delivery. They are told they will need to write a letter of complaint (by email) to the phone company.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• In small groups, they debate the contents of this letter (what crucial information should be included?).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• The groups are then given four samples of letters of complaint (relating to a similar, but different problem) and are asked to rank them according to their overall quality and effectiveness. The groups are asked to spell out the criteria they used.</td>
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</table>

**Task performance: Information gap task**

• Students read their texts in groups of four (a different text for each group).
• Group members discuss the contents of their text because they will be invited to exchange this information with other groups (without being allowed to take their text with them).
• Students regroup and are asked to exchange their information orally. They are shown five passwords, which they rank according to degree of safety.
• Students create a new password for themselves and check it against the password safety criteria the group has used.

**Task performance: Writing a letter of complaint**

• Students now write the first draft of their letter (making use of the criteria they discussed in the previous stage).
• Peers then provide feedback on drafts, and student revise letters accordingly.
• At the end of the first session, the students hand second drafts to the teacher, after which the teacher discusses the criteria for good letters of complaints with the whole class.
• After consensus has been reached, the teacher takes the drafts home and adds his/her own written feedback.
• During a second session, students revise their letters again and incorporate student and teacher feedback.

**Post-task phase**

• Students summarise what they have learnt on the features of safe passwords, and reflect on the group work they have done and the contribution of individual group members.
• Teacher provides follow-up activities that give students the opportunity to practise further specific vocabulary that featured in the articles they read.

**Post-task phase**

• Students receive another set of letters of complaints (pertaining to another problem), and are asked to provide feedback and rank them according to their overall quality.
• During this stage, a focus on relevant language forms may be added.

In line with this, the assessment component of a task-based curriculum is built around the performance of tasks. What needs to be assessed in the first place is the extent to which learners are increasingly able to do functional things with language and to use language to reach all kinds of goals (Norris, 2009). Tasks, then, constitute the central unit of analysis not only for determining the goals of a curriculum (target tasks) and organising classroom activity (pedagogic tasks) but also for following, monitoring and evaluating learners’ ongoing language development.
(assessment tasks). From this, it naturally follows that discrete-item tests (e.g., vocabulary tests measuring the knowledge of isolated words or tests measuring the explicit knowledge of particular grammar rules) are less informative than more holistic assessments in which learners are observed when performing communicative tasks. Besides formal test-taking situations, a wide range of instruments and procedures may be utilised for task-based assessment purposes, including observations of tasks-in-action (both inside and outside the classroom), peer- and self-assessment and portfolio assessment. Student rating will primarily focus on evaluating the extent to which the learner can perform the task to criterion and reach the intended goal rather than the students’ ability to produce particular words or phrases. By comparing learners’ performance of specific tasks with these same learners’ performance of similar tasks or easier versions of the same task type, teachers can keep track of learners’ language development. In other words, comparing learners with themselves may be more crucial than comparing learners with other learners (as is typically done in many classrooms around the world).

From a task-based perspective, formative assessment is as important as summative assessment. While summative assessment primarily serves to determine the students’ current level of language proficiency, formative assessment aims to inform and support the learners’ development, for instance by providing them with feedback on the basis of the assessment. In line with recent empirical research into the crucial value of feedback on learning processes (Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Hattie and Yates, 2014), feedback based on task-based assessment may provide learners with detailed insights into their current level of development and where they can move next; it may alert learners to misconceptions they have (e.g., about the meaning of particular words), systematic errors they make, particular strategies they fail to use and specific points of attention (for instance, with regard to the pragmatic use of particular expressions). In all of these cases, the feedback may also contain information about possible solutions to such problems or invite the students to try to come up with a solution themselves. Assessment, then, can (and should) do more for learners than merely inform them about the level they have reached and the class they will be allowed to enter next; assessment becomes more powerful as it feeds students’ language learning process in a personalised, learner-tailored way. As such, it can add to learners’ motivation by making their progress visible and by showing them how they can move from their current stage of development to the next.

Critical issues and points of debate

**Sequencing tasks**

One critical issue that designers of a task-based syllabus and teachers working with tasks need to address is the sequencing of tasks in the curriculum. As mentioned above, pedagogical tasks are increasingly complex approximations of target tasks; this, however, implies that the parameters that determine the relative complexity of pedagogical tasks can be identified and manipulated as required, and that theories of second language learning are sufficiently clear on the ways in which these parameters need to be manipulated to produce teaching sequences that are more or less in line with, or at least do not conflict with, developmental sequences (i.e., the order in which certain features of the language are acquired). However, determining the complexity of tasks constitutes a very complex puzzle in itself. To date, it is still largely unclear which particular task features are crucial in this respect, even if much of the recent research in the fields of applied linguistics, SLA research and language pedagogy which explicitly refers to task-based learning and/or teaching has been devoted to determining the relative impact of specific features of the task itself, the conditions under which tasks are performed on task complexity and the difficulty specific tasks pose to learners.
Based on the available empirical research, different theoretical frameworks have been proposed and put to the test, two of which have been particularly prominent over the past two decades: Robinson’s ‘cognition hypothesis’ (Robinson, 2011) and Skehan’s ‘tradeoff hypothesis’ (Skehan, 2014). Although these frameworks have been presented as diametrically opposed to each other, including by the authors themselves, they have a great deal in common: both mainly focus on the cognitive dimensions of tasks and primarily measure the impact of specific task features and task performance conditions on the fluency, accuracy and complexity of the output language learners produce. Robinson’s and Skehan’s models mainly differ in their view of the interplay between cognitive task features and the capacity of the learner’s brain to handle task complexity (and the impact this has on learning trajectories). While Skehan emphasises that the learner’s working memory capacity is limited, as a result of which a rise in task complexity will lead to loss of either accuracy, complexity or fluency, Robinson maintains that a trade-off need not be the case: manipulating the complexity of tasks may be expected to push learners’ output and promote heightened attention to formal aspects of the target language. To date, however, the available research results are mixed. While the lists of factors that are included in Robinson’s and Skehan’s frameworks are long and the parameters are of a very diverse nature, the relative contribution of the different parameters remains unclear. Equally, the extent to which the relation between parameters (in determining task complexity) is stable across task types, for different types of learners and in different types of communicative contexts is still a matter of debate. In addition, it remains to be seen to what extent this research can be instructive for measuring the relative complexity of reception-based tasks (and sequencing them), the extent to which task complexity has a systematic impact on the way different types of learners perceive and approach different tasks, and how far the dimensions explored in this research can be systematically implemented in the design and use of tasks.

In this respect, it should also be noted that research has yet to take adequate account of the full range of dimensions involved in characterising language development. In particular, the focus on the impact of task features on the complexity, accuracy and fluency of students’ output (commonly abbreviated as the CAF-measures) may reveal only a fragmented picture of what it takes to become better at using a language for functional purposes. In ‘real life’ outside the classroom, the output of second language learners will be evaluated along a wider range of dimensions than the CAF-measures used to date; moreover, these dimensions may differ depending on the context in which communicative activity takes place. For example, in real life, the sociolinguistic and pragmatic appropriateness of learners’ output and the degree to which they can be understood by their interlocutor may have a far greater impact on the successful and smooth flow of communication, and hence on successful task performance, than the accuracy or complexity of the output that is produced. In a similar vein, learners’ vocabulary reach (both in terms of understanding the words used by the interlocutor and producing context-appropriate vocabulary themselves) may have a strong impact on the degree to which tasks in real life are performed to criterion. In this respect, it should also be noted that second language learners’ accuracy, fluency and complexity gains may be highly context- and genre-specific: while some learners may become able to perform tasks relating to a particular domain/genre increasingly better as they get ample opportunity to learn to do so, their performance in terms of accuracy, complexity and fluency may stabilise or fail to grow in other domains or genres that do not feature in the same learners’ needs profiles.

**Individual learner differences**

This brings us to another critical issue in the task-based domain: the impact of individual learner differences on task-based learning. As can be inferred from the previous paragraph, in TBLT, the
Kris Van den Branden

learner is prototypically addressed and identified as an active participant to task-based communication, as someone who deliberately sets out to reach a particular goal he or she finds intrinsically interesting and therefore launches into action. Even if the teacher is still a crucial participant in task performance in terms of organising classroom activity, interactionally supporting task-based work and assessing learners’ development, the learners’ agency is pivotal in TBLT. As a result, as in any approach, task-based language teaching will only have an effect on task-based learning to the extent that learners actively engage in task performance, participate in the task-based interaction and deploy the mental activity that results in the processing of information and, ultimately, in language development. Teachers cannot do the language learning for learners; similarly, tasks do not cause learning. Tasks may be powerful vehicles for the kind of mental processing that can lead to learning, but much will depend on the learner’s willingness to engage in task performance and on learners’ ability to deal with task exigencies. The implications of this insight are considerable:

a wide range of learner-related variables, which researchers have barely begun to explore, enter into play and may shake up the basic view that particular types of tasks have systematic and relatively predictable effects on different learners’ second language development (see Dörnyei, 2009, for an overview; also, MacIntyre, Gregersen and Clément’s review of Individual Differences, this volume). Cognitive variables include (amongst others) the learner’s memory and brain capacity, general knowledge, prior language knowledge (including the knowledge of other languages than the target language), IQ and preferred learning approach; socio-emotional variables include (amongst others) the learner’s overall motivation to learn languages and the target language in particular, task motivation, self-confidence, well-being, relationship with the teacher and peers and language anxiety; other learner-related variables that should be taken into consideration include the learner’s age, gender, prior educational background and socio-economic status. As recent research into learning processes amply show (Hattie and Yates, 2014), all of these have a potential impact on an individual’s approach to learning tasks and, hence, on the learning that comes out of it. To date, however, there is very little research that illustrates how task-based work in second language classrooms is affected by these variables.

The implementation of TBLT in ‘real’ classrooms

Over the past three decades, a great number of teachers around the world have become acquainted with the basic principles of TBLT and have started to work with tasks in their classrooms; in many countries, tasks are now included in mainstream syllabuses, textbooks and handbooks. However, the available research on the implementation of TBLT in actual classrooms, which is still relatively limited (Van den Branden et al., 2009), clearly indicates that ‘pure’ forms of task-based language teaching are rare. In most cases, tasks have been integrated in eclectic, hybrid approaches which appear to present teachers with an acceptable mix of the traditional approaches they are familiar with and the innovations they are able, and willing, to digest (e.g. Van den Branden et al., 2007; East, 2012; Shehadeh and Coombe, 2012). In some regions, such as in parts of Southeast Asia, the actual implementation of TBLT proceeds with great difficulty, even though governments are trying to push the approach; the fact that the basic tenets of TBLT have been shown to clash with teachers’ and learners’ deeply ingrained beliefs about hierarchic teacher–learner relations in the classroom and the importance of explicit teaching and accuracy, and with the sheer size of most classes as well as the form–focus of the official exams that students need to prepare for, makes the implementation of a full-blown task-based approach to second and foreign language teaching extremely challenging (e.g. Carless, 2003; Shehadeh and Coombe, 2012). In fact, many of these factors also turn the implementation of TBLT in Western classrooms into a real challenge for many teachers.
All this boils down to the fact that the nature of an approach such as TBLT (like any other approach) is bound to be shaped by the people who choose to work with it. Tasks on paper are merely workplans. Once they enter into the hands of actual teachers, they become reinterpreted and reshaped to fit the latter’s predispositions, capabilities, educational beliefs and established classroom practices. A growing body of empirical evidence (e.g. Van den Branden et al., 2007; East, 2012; Shehadeh and Coombe, 2012) vividly illustrates the myriad ways in which teachers and learners alike produce highly different versions of tasks-on-paper (as designed by syllabus designers), sometimes resulting in classroom activities that should be regarded more as manifestations of a grammar-based, explicit, teacher-dominated approach rather than a task-supported, let alone a task-based, form of language teaching. As argued by Van den Branden (2006), language teaching itself does not become task-based overnight simply by importing tasks into the classroom; neither do teachers become eager and/or proficient at using tasks to create powerful language learning environments just by being handed a task-based syllabus. As much as learners need interactional support to bridge the gaps between task demands and their current proficiency, teachers need to be supported while integrating tasks into their current approach. This support may take different shapes, but to support implementation in the classroom, it should preferably be as practice-based and teacher-oriented as possible, for, in the end, it is the teachers who are in the centre of this progressive dynamic. In their own schools, teachers can profit, for example, from team-teaching and discussing tasks (and task-based lessons) among each other, from videotaping themselves or being observed by/observing colleagues working with tasks, from asking students about their experiences with TBLT and from deliberating with colleagues about target tasks and task-based approaches to assessment. At regional and nation-wide levels, the availability of task-based syllabi, materials and assessment tools could make a crucial difference for teachers. In addition, more classroom-based research into the practice of TBLT is sorely needed. This could generate rich descriptions of task-based work and video clips that could inspire many teachers or even provide models they can learn from. Likewise, this kind of research could generate practice-based recommendations on how to work with tasks in specific kinds of classrooms.

In this respect, much of the available research into the classroom-based use of tasks shows the strong potential impact of working with tasks on second language acquisition. Not all of this research is subsumed under the explicit heading ‘task-based’, which may actually be considered an advantage in view of the fact that researchers who set out to prove the merits of the educational approach they favour in their pedagogically oriented writings tend to be distrusted by practitioners. In fact, much can be learnt nowadays from the ‘evidence-based’ approach to classroom-based research, as summarised by Hattie (2011) and Marzano et al. (2001), amongst others. The meta-analyses produced by these researchers, which are based on thousands of empirical studies, provide strong indications that a classroom approach that is centred around the performance of functional, motivating and challenging reading and writing tasks in which the explicit focus on reading and writing strategies and on particular linguistic forms is tightly embedded within a meaningful task has strong effects on the development of reading and writing skills. For the productive skills, feedback (in the shape of a varied repertoire of interactional moves and devices), embedded within the performance of complex tasks calling for higher reasoning and functional interaction, has been shown to be of crucial value to language learning; Hattie’s empirical research provides ever-clearer indications of which types of feedback are most productive, and these are clearly in line with the results of available meta-analyses on the impact of interaction on second language learning (e.g. Mackey and Goo, 2007). In a similar vein, the importance of task repetition, as well as the fact that learning is cumulative and builds upon repeated, prolonged deliberate practice rather than being the result of one particular instance of task performance, is
strongly supported by the empirical evidence summarised in the publications on evidence-based teaching mentioned above. On the whole, the evidence-based approach to classroom-based research strongly indicates that if higher-order, functional, holistic skills constitute the major goals of the curriculum, then learners should get ample opportunity to try and perform motivating, challenging (yet doable) and meaningful tasks that demand the application of the target skills. But, as mentioned above, to turn this into the kind of material that teachers can profit from, these research-based insights need to be translated into worked-out examples of tasks (preferably with annotations describing how certain research-based principles are at work), video recordings of teachers working with tasks and practice-based recommendations. It is high time we moved from meta-analyses of research to mega-banks of classroom data focusing on teachers working with tasks.

Future challenges

The conceptualisation, theoretical underpinning, research-based revision and refining, and the practical implementation of task-based language teaching can all be referred to as ‘work-in-progress’. Though a large number of publications are now available which describe the basic principles of task-based language teaching (see this chapter’s suggestions for further reading), TBLT, aiming to be a research-based approach to language teaching, is dynamic and, by definition, open to constant reinterpretation.

Clearly, current theory on second language learning and on the impact of formal education on learning, which underpins the pedagogical outlook of TBLT, is in need of further refinement. Though referring back to learning theories proposed by distinguished educationalists like Dewey and Vygotsky – which emphasise holistic learning, learner activity and meaningful interaction – theory regarding the exact relationship between tasks, learning and teaching still remains relatively vague. In essence, task-based language teaching is derived from a view of language learning that is largely based on the notions of contingency and agency. The first refers to the hypothesis that what learners learn (and can learn) is strongly contingent on the kind of exposure to language and language use they get (hence, explicit grammar knowledge does not automatically result in learners’ competence to use the known grammar rule for communicative purposes, much as listening skills do not automatically transfer to speaking skills). Future research will need to inform our understanding of contingency in task-based work and, amongst other factors, the relative contribution of implicit and explicit learning processes. The second notion, agency, refers to the hypothesis that tasks do not cause learning but are useful vehicles for launching the agency of second language learners in the deliberate practice of communicative language use and verbal interaction and, in this process, engaging those conscious and unconscious attentional processes that lead to learning. Directly related to the notion of agency, the theory-building underpinning TBLT increasingly acknowledges the crucial importance of socio-emotional, cognitive, physical, affective and motivational learner characteristics (Verhelst, 2006; Long, 2015). The learner is the agent of his or her own learning, but it will take a considerable degree of further theorising (and research which empirically supports the theory) to get a firm grip on the relative impact of the many variables that are here at play.

In a similar vein, the development of task-based curricula, courses and materials present many challenges, some of which have been so poorly addressed (on a conceptual level) that just about anything that people do in a language classroom has been labelled ‘a task’. Besides the issue of sequencing (noted earlier), many other questions besiege the task-based syllabus and course developer: how might teachers differentiate between learners during a task-based lesson? In which stage of the three-stage model is form-focus most effective? How might technology be
Integrated into the task-based classroom? To what extent should accuracy and the use of specific linguistic items be included in the grading rubrics of a task-based test?

Another huge challenge related to TBLT is the training of teachers. As inspiring and refreshing as task-based language teaching may seem to second language learners and many of their teachers, the actual implementation of TBLT will succeed only to the extent that it takes heed of practitioners’ current educational beliefs and the context in which they are operating. The implementation of task-based language teaching should be duly acknowledged as a task for teachers, one many teachers may find intrinsically motivating and challenging but one that they should also consider as doable, rewarding (both for themselves and their students) and effective.

A major challenge underlying these challenges at the theoretical, conceptual and practical level is the accumulation of practice-based and practice-oriented research that documents what teachers and learners actually do with tasks in their classrooms, what the learners ultimately learn from them and which variables have the greatest effect on the impact of the classroom work on the learning. As much as form follows function in TBLT theory, theory-building follows practice and research, at least if we have the latter at our disposal.

**Conclusion**

Task-based language learning is an exciting, motivating, communicative and interactive approach to language learning. Because of their holistic nature, tasks can be used as educational tools to create learning opportunities in which the full complexity of language use may be experienced in real operating conditions and in which interactional work built up around shared, goal-directed projects offers rich affordances for exploring how language forms can be used to create meaningful messages that serve the pursuit of social/functional goals. Future research may, it is hoped, further document the strengths and weaknesses of the approach. Ultimately, however, the effectiveness of task-based language education relies upon the extent to which it allows and supports learners to learn to do the things with language that matter in their personal lives outside the classroom.

**Discussion questions**

- Do you believe task-based language teaching is possible from the very beginner stages of language acquisition?
- Do you think task-based language teaching is an effective approach for all language learners?
- Do you think task-based language teaching is a feasible approach for all teachers?

**Related topics**

Cognitive perspectives on classroom language learning; Communicative language teaching in theory and practice; Errors, corrective feedback and repair.

**Further reading**

Ellis, R. (2003) *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (This volume provides a good overview of the principles underpinning TBLT and the empirical research supporting them.)

References


