

Book Review

Foundational principles of task-based language teaching

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Since its emergence in the 1980s, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been regarded as a language pedagogy that fosters genuine communication and has the capacity to cultivate learners' communicative competence. Consequently, TBLT research has become a vibrant and evolving field with numerous researchers exploring its theoretical foundations and gathering empirical evidence to support or challenge its effectiveness as a language teaching approach (e.g., Ellis, 2017; Erlam, 2016). In his recent publication, *Foundational Principles of Task-based Language Teaching*, Martin East adeptly navigates through the theoretical bases, implementation and assessment of TBLT. By delving into the book, readers will embark on a journey of deepening their understanding of TBLT while gaining valuable insights that inform pedagogical decisions and advance research within this domain.

The book is divided into three sections: *Theorizing TBLT*, *Practicing TBLT*, and *Evaluating TBLT*. These sections arguably represent the three stages of understanding and implementing TBLT. Part I offers an overview of the theoretical perspectives that have underpinned second language acquisition (SLA) and driven the development

of TBLT. Chapter One primarily focuses on the fundamental principles that inform language learning, namely behaviorism, innatism and interactionism, and corresponding teaching approaches such as grammar translation, audiolingualism, the natural approach and communicative language teaching (CLT). The author emphasizes that CLT incorporates various teaching approaches that vary with regard to the roles of teachers and learners. The so-called strong CLT approach negated grammar instruction and the organization of classroom activities revolving solely around communication (fluency), while weak CLT involved a significant focus on grammar teaching (accuracy), often with limited communicative language use (Spada, 2007). The tensions emerging between strong and weak CLT paved the way for the emergence of TBLT, which has the capacity to reconcile learners' attention to both fluency and accuracy. Chapter Two delves into several theoretical underpinnings that support the emergence and development of TBLT which the author considers as "a logical development of CLT" (p. 25). These theoretical foundations include the input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), the output hypothesis (Swain, 1985), and the interaction hypothesis (Long, 1983). The benefits of communicative interaction are then explored from both a cognitive and sociocultural perspective. Chapter Three starts with examining various definitions of the task construct (Crookes, 1986; Long, 1985; Nunan, 1989; Willis, 1996) and brings to the fore several core elements informing the construct (Ellis, 2003; Ellis & Shintani, 2014; Skehan, 1998; Willis & Willis, 2007) that repeatedly appear throughout the book – real-world relationships, focus on meaning, gap and outcome. This is followed by an outline of various typologies of task types (Pica et al., 1993; Prabhu, 1987; Willis, 1996) and examples of tasks.

Part II addresses crucial issues surrounding the implementation of TBLT. In Chapter Four, the author introduces several noteworthy TBLT projects around the globe, each enacted for different reasons (e.g., teaching practitioners experimenting with task-based ideas or government mandated TBLT through authorized syllabi) and through different means (e.g., reliance on teacher intuition or provision of task-based syllabi, materials, and teacher education). This leads to a crucial consideration in TBLT in practice: where should tasks be optimally positioned on the learner-centered/experiential and teacher-led/expository continuum of TBLT implementation? To address this complicated issue, the author discusses the Type A/B syllabus dichotomy (i.e., learners synthesize carefully sequenced grammar structures or analyze the holistically presented language) and acknowledges that the Type B (analytical) syllabus aligns well with TBLT in theory. Despite the compatibility between TBLT and the Type B syllabus, the author highlights the pivotal role that teacher beliefs play in translating the syllabus into action, emphasizing that "the ultimate application of TBLT" is "in the hands of teachers themselves" (p. 84). Following the discussion of syllabus choice, Chapter

Five explores practical strategies that help facilitate the effectiveness of TBLT implementation, including task evaluation (i.e., what makes a task a task), and sequencing and scaffolding strategies (i.e., putting tasks together and supporting learners as they carry these tasks out). Chapter Six brings another controversial yet crucial issue to the forefront: how a focus on grammar (or form) might best occur within TBLT. Despite differing views on, for example, form-focused instruction (Ellis, 2009; Long, 2015), the author acknowledges the centrality of tasks and the significance of developing learners' grammatical competence in a task context, provides guidance for enacting oral/written corrective feedback, and discusses the ongoing debate about the use of learners' first language (L1) in the L2 classroom.

Part III primarily focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of TBLT implementation. After providing an introduction to language learning assessment, Chapter Seven asserts that the goals of task-based language assessment (TBLA) extend beyond evaluating whether learners can achieve the task outcome. It emphasizes the need for fine-grained assessment criteria that clearly define key components of language use, which can then be used to evaluate task performance. In Chapter Eight, the evaluation of task effectiveness is examined at both the micro and macro level (i.e., what happens in individual classrooms and what happens in programs and wider contexts, respectively). East proposes a three-step cyclical process of micro evaluation that teachers can conduct in their own classrooms, encompassing *forward planning* (i.e., what will happen in a planned lesson), *moment-by-moment classroom decision making* (i.e., taking into account what actually happens) and *retrospective reflection* (i.e., thinking about what might need to change in future lessons). Ellis's (2011) student-oriented micro-evaluation that measures students' perceptions, performance, and learning results, focusing on both product and process, is also explored. Macro-evaluation zooms out to assess the broader contexts at institutional, regional, or national levels. The author revisits the five contexts introduced in Chapter Four, discussing both the positive findings and the challenges reflected in the actual implementation of TBLT. Chapter Nine explores the challenges faced by teachers who intend to implement TBLT and the theoretical and practical endeavors teachers and researchers can undertake to advance the field. As regards supporting teachers to implement TBLT, the author puts forward the steps involved in enacting teacher education initiatives, such as establishing a baseline of beliefs (i.e., what teachers currently believe about effective practice), introducing key theoretical concepts that inform TBLT, and trying out (and evaluating) tasks in real classrooms.

One of the major strengths of the book lies in its remarkable readability. Martin East adeptly incorporates the intricacies of TBLT within around 200 pages. What makes the accomplishment more remarkable is that the author not only positions TBLT among various theoretical perspectives on SLA and language

pedagogy, but also neatly organizes TBLT-related topics into three comprehensive categories: theorizing, practicing, and evaluating. This structure shapes the book into a readable three-step guide, ideal for practicing teachers aiming to implement TBLT in their classrooms.

Furthermore, the book brings attention to teachers' active roles at various stages of task implementation. As regards syllabus choice, the author recognizes that teachers have the autonomy to enact a syllabus based on their own perceptions of effective language teaching in their specific context. Even when confronted with a structural syllabus, teachers are encouraged to embrace task-based activities if they so desire. During actual implementation of TBLT, teachers can judge the task-likeness of an activity on a continuum using certain criteria such as the six questions proposed by Willis and Willis (2007). When it comes to sequencing tasks, teachers' intuitions regarding task difficulty have been found to align well with the cognition hypothesis (Robinson, 2001), making them potentially reliable guides in evaluating the challenges tasks may pose for students. Teachers can also support students through explicit pre-teaching of language or through implicit means, such as activating learners' schema related to the topic or showing them videos that illustrate the task completion process. Given that TBLT is flexible enough to embrace different emphases on grammar, teachers have a decisive role to play in enacting different forms of TBLT through strategically manipulating the location, timing, and extent of explicit grammar focus. However, it is crucial that the purpose of the grammar focus remains centered on enhancing effective communication. After the implementation, the effectiveness of TBLT can be improved through teachers' reflections on TBLT practice, conducted in the cyclical manner – plan tasks, try out tasks, evaluate tasks, plan more tasks.

Another strength of the book that readers will surely appreciate is the author's ability to explain abstract concepts and complex theories in an accessible manner. In Chapter One, for instance, the author effectively distinguishes between behaviorism, innatism, and interactionism using three succinct sentences: "it's all about nurture," "it's all about nature," and "it's a bit of both" (p. 5). Similarly, the author presents the input hypothesis, the output hypothesis, and the interaction hypothesis as "it's all about the language learners receive," "it's all about the language learners create," and "it's all about the language learners share" (p. 25). These explanations enhance the readability of the text.

While reading the book, I found myself eagerly anticipating the beginning of each new chapter, as if approaching the book's conclusion would bring me closer to unraveling the secrets of effective TBLT. It is challenging to identify limitations in such an excellent book. One potential shortcoming could be the limited attention given to individual difference variables, including factors such as motivation, anxiety, and language aptitude. Considering that different learners

may approach TBLT in diverse ways, resulting in varied learning effects, further exploration of these variables would have added depth to the discussion and perhaps paved the way for future research as well. However, it is worth noting that the author emphasizes multiple times in the book that the task as planned can differ significantly from its actual enactment, requiring teachers to make moment-by-moment decisions to address the unique needs of individual students. Another limitation pertains to a pivotal question concerning TBLT, that is, its applicability across diverse educational settings. It is widely debated whether integrating tasks into foreign language classes can be successful due to resistance in specific cultural contexts, such as, for example, cultures that honor the Confucian tradition. In such contexts, both teachers and students may exhibit reluctance to engage in task-based activities, leading teachers to resort to more traditional grammar- and vocabulary-focused instructional approaches (Luo & Xing, 2015). Recognizing this challenge, the book offers comprehensive analyses of the successes and hurdles encountered in major TBLT projects conducted within distinct cultural contexts. Encouragingly, the book reveals that the perceived “cultural barriers” are less insurmountable than initially believed. Instead, it highlights that the primary hindrances to TBLT enactment are common challenges faced by all teachers. These universal obstacles include inadequate comprehension of TBLT theories, lack of accessible teaching materials and resources, and limited class time. However, it is worth noting that the insights from the five projects outlined in the book might not be able to fully elucidate the universal suitability of TBLT and a more extensive collection of cases might better illuminate this issue.

It is no exaggeration to say that Martin East is among the foremost scholars dedicated to the promotion of TBLT. He has produced many publications on teachers’ perceptions and practices of TBLT in foreign language classrooms (e.g., East, 2018, 2019, 2020). In my view, this background explains why this book encompasses so many insightful perspectives on TBLT which many teachers will find empowering and illuminating. I would like to recommend this book to researchers and postgraduate students who intend to explore TBLT as their research subject. Through reading this book, I believe they will be able to position their research in the vast galaxy of language teaching and learning more precisely and become clearer about where their research might lead them.

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