

# Is Task-based Language Teaching ‘The Answer’?

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to critically evaluate Task based language teaching (TBLT), understand its theoretical foundations, its implications for classroom practice and material design, and how it works in the language teaching context of Pakistan. The article explains that evolution of TBLT in its present form clearly indicates that it is a practical manifestation of communicative language teaching (CLT). It is also discussed how tasks can help learners engage in the process of negotiation for meaning that may ultimately lead them towards gaining language proficiency.

The authors also note that current language teaching environment and examination system in Pakistan may pose a serious challenge for a language teacher to use TBLT in classrooms.

However, it is noted that adapting TBLT to the local needs and situations may be the answer, various suggestions/recommendations in this regard are also given. The article also analyses various myths such as there is no room for ‘focus on form’ in TBLT and TBLT is not suitable for exam based teaching. While evaluating TBLT Krashen’s ground-breaking but controversial ideas such as the distinction between learning acquisition (acquisition-learning hypothesis) were also discussed.

**Key terms:** Task based language teaching (TBLT), Grammar translation method (GTM), Direct method, Audio lingual method(ALM), Communicative language teaching (CLT), Focus on form, acquisition-learning hypothesis, Second language teaching, Second language(L2)

## Task-based Language Teaching

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Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is one of the approaches to teach English as a second language. It aims at teaching language through engaging students in meaningful tasks, thus breaking away from the traditional methods of language teaching.

According to Long & Norris (Long & Norris, 2000) the development of this concept, and coinage of this term, is largely in reaction to empirical accounts of teacher-dominated, form-oriented second language teaching (cited in Van den Branden, 2006, p.1). TBLT is based upon the idea of communicative language teaching, which aims at teaching language in its real communicative context and exposing students to the language, which they are required to use in real life. So the emphasis is on how language is actually used instead of what is language. In a TBLT class students learn through their active participation in carefully designed tasks. Hence, learners instead of assuming passive roles, are actively engaged in classroom activities. Long (1985) and Prabhu (1987) supported an approach to teach language with the help of functional tasks having primary focus on ‘meaning exchange’ and using real life language ( cited in Van den Branden, 2006, p.1).

### **To Evaluate TBLT**

In order to critically evaluate TBLT, it is important to understand what it is and how language researchers define it. Long (1985:89) says that a “target task is a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, and helping someone across a road” (cited in Nunan, 2004, p.2). This definition explains that tasks are practical real life activities designed to acquaint learners with real life language use. Nunan (2004, p.4) while giving a precise definition of a task says “a pedagogical task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating , producing or interacting in the target language, while their attention is focussed on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning”. This definition highlights that while performing a task, language learners are required to draw on their grammatical knowledge to convey meanings. Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993) classify tasks into jigsaw tasks, information-gap

task, problem-solving tasks, decision making tasks and opinion exchange tasks (Richards & Rogers, p. 234). Hence, it is very clear that a common thread in these definitions is that a task is designed to encourage learners to use language in real life communicative context, or the real language, as many researchers term it.

## **Methods Used before TBLT**

### ***Grammar Translation Method***

In order to understand how TBLT evolved into its' present shape, and what it delivers which other methods of language teaching may not, it will be important to briefly review the methods of language teaching which prevailed before TBLT. The oldest method of language teaching was Grammar Translation Method (GTM). GTM was firstly employed to teach classical languages, e.g., Latin and Greek. It revolved around the idea of teaching grammar deductively, mastering the skill of translation from L1 to L2, and using literary text in language classrooms. Stern (1983: 455) notes that GTM approaches language through grammar rules, followed by translation (cited in Richards and Rogers, 2001, p. 5). GTM defied the natural approach of learning language, as language cannot be learnt only by teaching grammar, with emphasis on reading and writing. It makes learners more accuracy conscious, and they develop 'high affective filters', so arguably, a learner is less likely to achieve fluency in language and he/she may not even use 'survival English'. Such learners often struggle with speaking skill. As in GTM literary text are used to teach language, hence students fail to recognize the difference between literary/formal language and informal language, which is used in carrying out routine business of life. TBLT, on the other hand, exposes students to a learner-centred environment. Such an environment is conducive to the motivation and confidence level of students.

### ***Direct Method***

GTM gave way to Direct Method, which referred to teaching language in the target language (L2). Hence the focus was shifted on listening and speaking. According to Richards and Rogers (2001, p. 12) in Direct Method L2, everyday vocabulary and sentences were used in classrooms, while grammar was taught inductively. This method seemed overzealous in avoiding L1, with focus mainly on speaking and listening, while in TBLT, all skills can be

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effectively taught. For example in addition to teaching listening and speaking, writing as a process can also be taught with the help of TBLT. Hence, unlike direct method, TBLT appears all encompassing.

### ***Audio-Lingual Method***

Next in line is Audio-lingual Method, which was a product of behaviourist theory. The advocates of this method believed that language can be taught through reinforcement and habit formation. Students were given extensive oral drills and were asked to imitate their instructor. ALM was criticised by Chomsky. Chomsky (1957:153) wrote, “Language is not a habit structure. Ordinary linguistic behaviour characteristically involves innovation, formation of new sentences and patterns” (cited in Richards and Rogers, 2001, p. 65). TBLT, on the other hand, encourages creativity in language use. Learners instead of imitating language, are involved in tasks which require them to brainstorm, work in groups, share their thoughts and generate new ideas. Hence they may develop critical and creative skills at the same time.

### ***Communicative Language Teaching***

In the backdrop of the methods discussed above, a widespread realization grew that language goes beyond grammatical rules, sets of vocabulary, habit formation, and it was realized that language is a ‘dynamic source of creating meaning’. Hence this changed mind-set laid the foundations of Communicative language teaching, which was a paradigmatic shift. Communicative language teaching views language as a communication tool rather than sets of ‘phonological, grammatical and lexical items’ (Nunan, 2004, pp 6-7).

CLT advocated teaching language in real life context. Therefore, providing learners with an opportunity to learn language goes beyond the confines of classrooms. TBLT aims at translating the goals of CLT into reality. Communicative tasks, which are designed keeping in view the practical needs of learners, are the means to this end. As Nunan (2004, p.10) explains, “CLT is a broad, philosophical approach to the language curriculum that draws on theory and research in linguistics, anthropology, psychology and sociology”. Task-based

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language teaching represents a realization of this philosophy at the levels of syllabus design and methodology.

### ***Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis***

In the context of TBLT, it is important to explain Krashen's acquisition-learning hypothesis which claims that acquisition and learning are two different psycholinguistic processes in second language acquisition. Learning is a conscious process, while acquisition is subconscious, similar to first language acquisition, and is activated when individual uses language for communication (Nunan, 2004, p.77). It implies that when an individual is in a traditional language classroom, where the emphasis is on learning language consciously with 'focus on form', he will not be able to acquire language. He will only acquire language when he uses it in communicative context. One may argue that there are scores of such examples where one finds such individuals who have been taught through GTM, or in other words through 'focus on form' approach, yet their L2 proficiency is native like or close to it. A likely reply from Krashen to this argument may be that these individuals were motivated, had a keen interest in L2, and picked up language through acquisition and not learning.

### **Distinction between Learning and Acquisition**

The distinction between learning and acquisition is not as simple as Krashen made it to be. As Nunan maintains, "What made Krashen's views controversial was his insistence that these are two totally separate processes, the conscious learning could not 'bleed into' subconscious acquisition, and that communicative competence in a second language could only be acquired through subconscious acquisition" (Nunan, 2004, p.77). Gass and Selinker also voiced the same objection, according to them Krashen provided no evidence that learning and acquisition are two separate processes (Gass and Selinker, 2001, p.203). Spada comments: "Although Krashen's theory of SLA has been widely criticized for failing to propose hypotheses that can be empirically tested, most teachers and many researchers find his views intuitively appealing. There is little doubt that Krashen's work has been highly influential in shaping and supporting CLT, particularly in North America" (Spada, 2007 p. 274).

Language can be learnt through combining conscious and subconscious processes. It will not be possible to write off focus on form from this language learning equation, in TBLT such a learning scenario should be attempted where acquisition and learning should complement each other. According to Nunan, acquisition-learning hypothesis favours ‘strong interpretation’ of TBLT which implies that in TBLT classroom subconscious learning should take place, and learners should be engaged in communicative tasks rather than form focussed drills. He further adds that he is not in favour of such an extreme position, he believes that there is room for form focussed instruction in TBLT classroom (Nunan, 2004, pp.77-78).

### **Comprehensible Input Hypothesis**

Here it is equally important to mention Krashen’s Comprehensible Input Hypothesis. According to Krashen, the single most important source of L2 learning is comprehensible input, or language, which learners process for meaning and which contains something to be learned, that is, linguistic data slightly above their current level. This linguistic input was called as  $i+1$  by Krashen. Learners obtain comprehensible input mostly through listening to oral messages that interlocutors direct to them, and via reading written texts that surround them. When L2 learners process these messages for meanings, grammar learning will naturally occur (cited in Ortega, 2009, p. 59). Krashen (1985, p.2) explains that humans acquire language by understanding message, learners move from  $i$  their current level, to  $i+1$ , the next level (cited in Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p.165). Schmidt (1995) claimed that in order to learn L2, learners are required to notice the ‘linguistic data afforded by environment’ which triggers the brain to ‘register the new material’ (cited in Ortega, 2009, p. 63). Krashen’s ideas provided food for thought for researchers and language teachers. As language teachers observe that arguably in TBLT, often this ‘ $i+I$ ’ formula works to a good effect. It presents learners with a challenge, and could really have a motivating effect on learners, if the task is finished successfully.

### **Criticism of Krashen’s Ideas**

Krashen’s ideas, though very interesting, were criticised on the grounds that it is not clear how the learners’ present state of knowledge ( $i$ ) is to be characterized, or indeed whether the  $i+1$  formula is intended to apply to all aspects of language, including vocabulary and

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phonology as well as syntax (Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p. 165). It is also important to mention that some language teachers who are not well-trained, and not settled in the real mould of TBLT, may supply 'i+2' input, as sometimes it is not easy for them to differentiate between i+1 and i+2. This will result in making the task difficult and could have a negative effect on the motivation level of learners.

Alison Mackey (1999) was the first to report the positive relation between interaction and acquisition. She examined 34 intermediate ESL adult learners working with native speakers. Among these 34 learners, 14 were allowed and encouraged to interact, and they showed visible improvement in their use of English questions on the immediate post-test (Ortega, 2009, p.65). Mackey's experimental study showed that those learners who interacted progressed one (or more) stages in second language question formation, as compared to those who didn't interact (Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p.172). Rivers (1987) argued that without interaction, real learning cannot take place, according to Rivers, communication derives essentially from interaction when someone has something to share with someone else ( cited in Franco, 1996, p.124).

Hatch (1978) was one of the first researchers who argued that we learn how to converse in second language by having conversations, rather than first learning grammatical structures and then using them in conversation (Nunan, 2004, p-79). So, Hatch believed that interaction should come first, and the movement should be from interaction to developing grammatical knowledge. A study conducted by R. Ellis and He (1999) will further elaborate the concept of negotiation of meaning, output in second language acquisition, and its implications for TBLT (Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p.175). As we understand that TBLT is mainly a learner-centred approach and according to Ellis such a humanistic approach will help learners share and recognize feelings. This practice will make them much more confident, more motivated and will boost their self-esteem (Ellis, 2003, p.30). The humanistic approach as mentioned by Ellis ensures equality and learners feel more relaxed, and are mentally ready to absorb new concepts.

When students are engaged in a task, they interact, share their thoughts, agree or disagree with their fellows, without any fear. The traditional language classes may not achieve these



desired results, especially when a teacher instead of being a facilitator, assumes the role of an absolute authority. According to Poupore (Poupore, 2005, p.253) “There is obviously more to the positive dimensions of interaction than just the negotiation of meaning. By giving students more freedom to control tasks we are also giving them more opportunities to experiment with their language and to naturally discuss and negotiate elements related to task content, procedures, and personal experiences”.

### **Designing a Task-based Course**

A key question while designing a task based course is where should ‘focus on form’ figure. Either a task should begin with a focus on form activity and then takes learners to focus on meaning. As Nunan notes (Nunan, 2004, p. 101) that in early versions of task-based teaching, ‘focus on form’ came in the beginning of a task. This was termed as ‘pre-communicative stage’ of a lesson. This was intended to provide students with some basis for the communicative work. The rationale for this practice was that it was unrealistic to ask learners to use language that had not been explicitly taught. Ellis (2001) argues for consciousness-raising tasks that are designed to introduce learners to particular linguistic feature through a range of inductive and deductive methods (cited in Nunan, 2004, p. 98).

According to Willis & Willis such activities which at the same time ‘focus on form and meaning’ are difficult for learners. When learners think of form and have to communicate at the same time, their communication is bound to be ‘halted and stilted’ (Willis & Willis, 2007, p.16). It can be said that a teacher, keeping in view his context, has to make a decision regarding where he will place ‘focus on form’ or how will he embed ‘focus on form’ in a task-based activity. A solution in such a situation may be to focus on form at the end of a task. It will help learners to make sense of the language which has been used in a task. Besides when focus on form comes at the end, learners have a context to understand new language. By putting grammar at the end of a task, the motivation level of learners will also increase (Willis & Willis, 2007, p.25). This may be an effective way of using TBLT with a group of learners who are more grammar conscious or have limited knowledge of grammar. Grammar does have a value in TBLT and negating this fact may not help teachers to achieve results.

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## **Ensuring Learners' Involvement**

Another way to ensure learners involvement in task is initiating a brainstorming session before a role play activity, reading activity or a discussion task. Brainstorming will help learners come in comfort zone and even a seemingly difficult task may appear easy for them. With brainstorming a teacher can even have shy learners on board (Willis & Willis, 2007, p.66). It is also a common observation that with brainstorming exercise, a teacher is better-placed to help learners come out of their shells and they can break their psychological and 'foreign language anxiety' barriers. Brainstorming also increases the enthusiasm level of students, and arouse their curiosity which is helpful in doing a task.

In TBLT, learners often complete tasks through 'scaffolding'. Scaffolding stands for collaborative efforts in which a good learner and a weak learner are grouped together. They try to finish a task together, while doing so weak learner is helped by the good one, and they scaffold their way through. The aim of TBLT is to make learners, in the words of Nunan, 'reflective learners (Nunan, 2004, p.38). So the role of teacher becomes really important. If he is well-trained, knows how to inspire learners, how to win their confidence, and how to motivate them, he is best suited for TBLT.

## **Teachers and Settings of Learning Environment**

Teachers have to tailor TBLT according to their settings and learning environment. For example in Pakistan arguably, TBLT in its strong form is not practiced anywhere. Even in modern language institutes, teachers blend TBLT with other teaching methods, in order to make it work. There are many reasons for this tendency, though there is a growing realization about the importance of English in Pakistan, but it is still viewed as a written language and not a spoken one. Students are keen to achieve grammatical excellence in English and are much more concerned about accuracy. That is why it is common in Pakistan to see people having their Masters' degrees in English, yet not even reasonably fluent in spoken English. Students approach English from exam's perspective, and not from communicative

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perspective. Unfortunately some examinations set a high premium on grammatical accuracy than ability to use language. TBLT is not designed with examinations in mind, it aims at producing learners who can use English in real world outside classroom, even if their language is grammatically incorrect (Willis & Willis, 2007, p.2).

Another practical constraint for a teacher in these settings is that learners like to be corrected on regular basis. The question of how mistakes are corrected also has an important bearing on the overall learning process. Corrective feedback can be implicit or explicit, implicit corrective feedback is termed as recast and explicit is called direct correctness. According to Long an utterance that rephrases preceding utterance, 'by changing one or more of its sentence components (subject, verb, or object) while still referring to its central meanings, is recast (Long, 1996, p.436). Recast is important in the context of TBLT as 'focus on meaning' is what a teacher is trying to aim at. If mistakes are corrected in an explicit way, it may check fluency and divert the whole attention of learners towards form, rather than the meaning. So fluency and negotiation of meaning may both be sacrificed. Explicit correctness may also embarrass a learner and erode his confidence. There are times when explicit correctness becomes necessary for example, In Pakistan students often demand for explicit feedback. In a situation, where explicit feedback becomes necessary, it must be provided in such a way that it doesn't discourage a learner and embarrass him in front of his peers. TBLT does not suggest that learners should not be corrected, but there is a method to it. "Correction helps prevent fossilization; learners are alerted to the fact that they still have some way to go. If used sparingly it helps motivate learners. It provides useful negative feedback. Sometimes negative feedback is the quickest and most efficient way of putting learners on the right track" (Willis & Willis, 2007, p.121). A key word in this quote is 'sparingly'. If a teacher is providing regular negative feedback to learners, instead of helping students, he may further push them back.

### **Situation in Pakistan**

In Pakistan, English is a language which is used in official correspondence, so learners aim at acquiring proficiency in written English. English is seldom used out of class or out of offices; it is not the language in which routine day to day business is carried out. Students mainly

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from government run schools are averse to TBLT. Many language departments in Pakistani universities instruct teachers to use TBLT in class, while most of the exams are not designed to check the communicative competence of students, this appears as a paradox. Learners don't often understand why they are given such tasks which are communicative and designed to help them learn language for real life. Nunan (Nunan, 2006, p.38) believes that, learners who have done their learning in traditional classrooms, can find TBLT 'mystifying and even alienating' as the focus shifts from language content to learning process. It will be unfair to blame students for thinking on these lines, as in Pakistan the skill one needs is formal written English. So resistance to TBLT is quite natural in this context.

### **Ideological Constraint**

Another constraint is an 'ideological one', being teachers at International Islamic University Islamabad we often come across students, who are graduated from madrassah schools (seminaries). These students are uncomfortable to learn English as they see it as a language of their erstwhile rulers. One may argue that this ideology is a misplaced one, yet it is a real constraint. Motivating such students to study English language and that too through TBLT, is a challenge for teachers. These students view English as language of foreigners and just want to get through their language courses, and are not keen to improve their communicative competence.

The way exams are designed does not auger well for TBLT also. English language exams are set with a focus on form approach. Questions are often set to test how well students can memorize texts. In such an academic context, using TBLT model is not easy, what compounds the problems even more is the fact that in Pakistan well trained teachers of English are in short supply. In such a scenario, such teachers are required, who can strike a balance between demands of students and the TBLT.

### **TBLT Most Suitable for Small Groups of Learners**

TBLT is ideally suited for small learning groups, but as it is the case with India & Pakistan, where it is not unusual to have large number of learners in a language classroom, TBLT may

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not be used effectively. For instance in Pakistan, even at the university level, it is not uncommon to see more than 30 students and in some cases around 50 in a language class. Therefore, conducting all stages of tasks efficiently in such big classes may be a daunting task.

It is quite a difficult task to use TBLT in its extreme version in a context that is discussed in the preceding paragraphs, but TBLT can still deliver in such an environment. The new approaches to TBLT do recognize the importance of grammar. Today many task-based activities are followed by teaching grammatical forms. In Pakistan, some teachers in a TBLT class introduce ‘focus on form’ in the beginning and then move towards more interactive activities. The rationale they give is that in this part of the world learners need good command over grammar to pass exams, as exams are still set in the traditional way with focus on writing grammatically correct English. So introducing grammar in the beginning may work, as it caters to the needs of the students, and they approach interactive tasks in a more relaxed frame of mind.

### **TLBT and CLT**

As it has already been explained in this paper that TBLT is a practical manifestation of CLT. Due to vagueness of the term, there are some myths which are attached with CLT. For example some of these widely held misconception are (e.g. Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999) that CLT exclusively focus on meaning, it means listening and speaking practice only and CLT means avoidance of learners’ L1. Research in CLT classrooms (Spada & Lightbown, 1989), where no (or little) attention is on language form indicates that in such classes students often fail to develop accuracy in many aspects of language. Results of some other studies (Harley 1995, Lyster 1994, Spada and Lightbown 1993, White, Spada, Lightbown and Ranta 1991) favour inclusion of form focused instruction which result in students’ better ability to use language. So in TBLT, there is enough room for form focused instruction. While employing TBLT in such contexts, grammar lessons should be incorporated while designing a syllabus.

### **Conclusion**

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While analysing various methods of language teaching, one may say that no method can be termed as the perfect one or the ideal method. Each method has its own pros and cons, same is true with TBLT. TBLT encourages interaction, makes students confident, motivates them, empower them to take charge of their own learning process. At the same time, it may not achieve desired results in all learning contexts and with all types of learners. It may not be suitable for large classrooms, exam preparation and accuracy conscious learners. Teachers have to tailor TBLT according to their own contexts and blend it with other methods, keeping in view the specific needs of their learners. In this way TBLT may still deliver in diverse contexts.

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