

Taking communication to task? A critical review of recent trends in language teaching

John Klapper
University of Birmingham

Work in the area of task-based language instruction has called into question certain central tenets of communicative language teaching. This article reviews recent research into task-based pedagogy and reflects on its implications for the foreign language classroom. Following a review of perceived weaknesses in the so-called communicative approach, the article examines the task-based critique of the traditional presentation-practice-production lesson paradigm and describes an alternative framework based around classroom tasks. A task-based approach is shown to accord better with what we know about second language acquisition than conventional 'synthetic' language syllabuses. However, attention is also drawn to a number of concerns with the approach as currently propounded, in particular its neglect of language learning as a cognitive process of skill acquisition. The article concludes by suggesting that tasks in the communicative classroom should be linked to a more consistent focus on form and to more guided practice than is currently envisaged by 'strong' versions of task-based teaching.

INTRODUCTION

The history of language teaching is littered with panaceas (e.g. the Direct Method), new wonder cures (e.g. Total Physical Response) and some major and lasting paradigm shifts, such as that from audiolingualism to communicative language teaching (CLT). The latter has now gained wide currency across the globe, but concerns about some aspects of it have prompted theorists and practitioners to seek to modify the approach. One significant development has been a growing interest in the role of tasks (Nunan, 1989), the development of so-called task-based syllabuses (Long and Crookes, 1992) and, more recently, of task-based teaching frameworks (Edwards, 2003; Skehan, 1996b; Willis, 1996a).

In what follows I examine this relatively new phenomenon and its claims to superiority over more 'conventional' and established communicative approaches. The article begins with a brief review of CLT and contentious aspects of its pedagogy. There then follows a description of the main features of task-based language teaching (TBLT), its rationale and view of second language (L2) development. Discussion of how a cognitive view of language learning might supplement a task-based approach leads finally to some tentative proposals for the way forward for language pedagogy.

THE TROUBLE WITH CLT...

Even though CLT has been around for a long time now, most language teachers' understanding of it remains fuzzy. Apart from the platitude that it involves an emphasis on 'communication', as well as pair work, information-gap activities and maximum target language use, there seems to be little consensus on methodology, still less on the theoretical basis of the approach.

Perhaps one should not really be surprised, for CLT adopts a 'post-method' view of language pedagogy (see Brumfit, 1988). 'Methods', such as The Silent Way or Suggestopedia, are based on a particular theory of language or language learning and involve a strict, unvarying instructional framework. CLT, by contrast, is an 'approach' characterised by a 'core set of theories and beliefs about the nature of language, of language learning, and a derived set of principles for teaching a language' (Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 245); as such, it lacks closely prescribed classroom techniques. The flexibility with which communicative principles can be applied and their potential for individual interpretation explains, in part, the durability of CLT, but it also explains why there is no easily recognisable pedagogical framework, no single agreed version of CLT and why the past 30 years have seen such variations in the way it has been adopted, adapted and, no doubt, distorted.

With regard to theory, it is a surprise for many to discover that the so-called communicative approach has few clear links to second language acquisition (SLA) research or psychological theories, indeed that it remains largely 'atheoretical' about learning (cf. Johnson, 1996: 173-4). If anything, it is closest to first language (L1) acquisition models and did indeed receive considerable impetus from acquisition order studies and 'input' theories of language acquisition (Burt, Dulay and Krashen, 1982; Krashen, 1981, 1982).

In the 'strong' version of CLT (Howatt, 1984) it is assumed that natural processes happening inside the learner's mind are responsible for language learning and that teachers cannot control these

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**Address for
correspondence:**
John Klapper
Centre for Modern
Languages
University of Birmingham
Edgbaston
Birmingham
B15 2TT
j.m.klapper@bham.ac.uk



processes directly. The teacher's role is, rather, to provide activities and language samples to help stimulate the acquisition processes, not to teach grammar or to correct all the mistakes learners make, but to allow learners to formulate and test hypotheses about the language and revise them once they have received feedback. Both the aim and the means of CLT are communication, and thus language is learnt through meaningful language use in the classroom: 'You learn to talk to people by actually talking to them' (Cook, 2001: 215). In the 'weak' version of CLT, on the other hand, the version one tends to find in most UK foreign language classrooms, the aim is the same, but the means used to achieve it are different. Classroom activities are more structured to enable learners to practise communicative functions in a controlled way and gradually to build up to freer, less directed meaningful L2 exchanges.

Both versions of CLT, at least as far as they have been translated to the average language classroom, have proved problematic. The areas of concern can be summarised as follows (for more detailed discussion see Block, 2002; Grenfell, 2000; Klapper, 1997, 1998; Meiring and Norman, 2001; Mitchell, 1994; Pachler, 2000):

- a restricted view of linguistic competence; in particular, promotion of communication as a largely formulaic, threshold ability, with emphasis on transactional language within a narrow functional range, the use of idealised dialogues and the learning of set phrases;
- the embracing of a meaning-based pedagogy with little conscious attention to form, in direct contradiction of one of the classic statements of communicative competence (cf. Canale and Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983); grammar is tied to certain functional contexts and learners have to rely on unanalysed chunks of language without any real understanding of their structure;
- forms appear independently of grammatical context; the resulting absence of a reliable frame of formal reference means learners' inaccuracies become systemic;
- the concomitant failure to build a generative language framework that enables learners to recombine linguistic elements and thus to create new or unique utterances;
- the mistaken belief that we learn to communicate solely or even largely by communicating, that 'doing' can replace 'knowing': whatever else may apply in naturalistic settings, in the foreign language setting the acquisition of knowledge and skills is a prerequisite of effective communication;
- linked to this, the downgrading of cognitive views of language learning, in particular of language learning as a process of skills acquisition dependent on the gradual proceduralisation and ultimate automatisisation of formal language knowledge (Johnson, 1996);

- too much emphasis on the role of the target language, resulting from the mistaken identity of L1 and L2 learning and the consequent promotion of meaning at the expense of form and cognitive aspects of language learning; excessive use of the target language can lead to a build-up of affective factors such as stress, frustration and embarrassment;
- an almost dogmatic insistence on all things 'authentic' and the use of frequently irrelevant target country situations and make-believe simulations, all predicated on an assumption of future language use; for secondary learners, in particular, this may mean they are never involved in truly meaningful interaction on the topics that actually matter to them.

QUESTIONING THE CLT FRAMEWORK

As the above list suggests, one of the greatest challenges that has faced CLT has been to find some way of linking attention to linguistic form with the communication of meaning. Littlewood's (1981) transition from the 'pre-communicative' (structural and quasi-communicative activities) to the 'communicative' (functional and social interaction) was influential in suggesting the methodological way forward here. This sequence has most typically been realised in the classic lesson structure of Presentation – Practice – Production, or 'PPP':

- a) **Presentation:** the teacher draws learners' attention to a specific form or structure, usually through contextualised use. If an inductive approach is adopted, the teacher may then encourage learners to formulate a rule to explain the use of the structure under consideration. Learners may subsequently be given the opportunity to produce the form themselves in tightly controlled circumstances (e.g. repetition, teacher-student question and answer, etc.).
- b) **Practice:** teacher control gradually eases and learners work on the particular form, initially in controlled conditions (e.g. substitution tables, gap-filling tasks, simple question-answer exercises, mini-dialogues with a partner), and then in freer exchanges using pictures and other visual or verbal stimuli.
- c) **Production:** learners engage in open practice, free of teacher control, where the focus is on meaning, such as a transactional role play, in which the target structure or function has to be used to complete the task. The aim is to consolidate what has been learnt in the preceding phases and extend learners' ability to apply the item in other contexts.

This methodological scheme features in numerous language textbooks, has for some time now been

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the stock-in-trade of many language teacher trainers (Rivers, 1981; Harmer, 1991), and is indeed designated 'The mainstream EFL style' by Cook (2001: 224-8). Its merits include its apparent concordance with general learning theories relating to the operationalisation and automatization of learnt rules, the fact that it makes the teacher's role clear and is an easily comprehensible and practical prop to, in particular, the beginning teacher, allowing simple lesson planning with distinct phases.

However, many people now reject the claims of PPP to being an authoritative account of the pedagogical process (see Willis and Willis, 1996, for example). They are critical of the proposition that it is possible to order 'chunks' of the language into a syllabus of graded difficulty and that a given item can be learnt and subsequently employed in spontaneous language use within the space of a single lesson or unit. They therefore point to the inappropriateness of standard coursebook objectives such as 'By the end of this unit you will be able to talk about the past using the perfect tense'. Even after a particular linguistic item **appears** to have been taught successfully (i.e. learners have jumped through all the hoops as intended and have used a particular form effectively in largely free oral interaction), it frequently becomes clear in a subsequent assessment, or even the next lesson, that the item has, in fact, still not entered learners' interlanguage (their current stage of L2 development) and is not being used correctly. For example, how often do you find yourself saying: 'I don't know how many times I've taught them these past participles, but still they make mistakes with them'? In short, PPP does not do what it promises.

TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING

TBLT rejects the assumptions on which mainstream communicative teaching is based, in particular the PPP paradigm. The approach has been the subject of much pedagogical research and language syllabus design work in recent years (Bygate, 1999a, 1999b; Bygate, Skehan and Swain, 2001; Crookes and Gass, 1993a, 1993b; Dörnyei and Kormos, 2000; Edwards, 2003; Ellis, 2000; Foster and Skehan, 1999; Johnson, 2000; Long and Crookes, 1992; Seedhouse, 1999; Skehan, 1996a, 1996b, 1998a, 1998b; Willis, 1996a, 1996b). It is fair to say that hitherto it has been a greater concern for the English language teaching world than for modern languages, but, to adapt the economists' metaphor, if English language teaching sneezes today, modern languages catch a cold tomorrow.

So what exactly is TBLT? At its simplest, it believes the communicative interaction characteristic of task-based work provides sufficient comprehensible input to 'trigger' acquisitional processes. It can thus be seen as an offshoot from or a development of CLT, especially the 'strong' version of the latter, asserting that language learning depends on learners being involved in real communication in which they use language in a meaningful way. However, unlike the strong version

of CLT, it crucially insists that acquisition needs to be supported by instruction that ensures a certain attention to linguistic form, that initial fluency work should lead gradually to accuracy-focussed activities.

Tasks can be defined in different ways but essentially they are meaning-based activities closely related to learners' actual communicative needs and with some real-world relationship, in which learners have to achieve a genuine outcome (solve a problem, reach a consensus, complete a puzzle, play a game, etc.) and in which effective completion of the task is accorded priority. In contrast to traditional language practice activities, where learners are meant to 'display' command of structures or other linguistic elements taught previously and often to reproduce other people's meanings (e.g. 'Describe these pictures using the following phrases'), in task-based learning they have to use their existing linguistic resources to complete the task; only later do they pay attention to language form. (See Willis, 1996b, for a quick, readable introduction and overview; see Larsen-Freeman, 2000: 146-50, for a sample task-based lesson.) In this way, TBLT differs significantly from the standard communicative teaching framework.

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND TBLT

Conventional L2 curricula divide the language into lexis, structures, notions or functions, which are then selected and sequenced for students to learn in a uniform and incremental way. In this so-called 'synthetic' syllabus (Wilkins, 1976), exposure to the target language is deliberately restricted and rationed, and the discrete parts of the syllabus gradually build on each other in the belief that this can lead the learner towards mastery of L2. TBLT rejects this type of syllabus:

The belief that a precise focus on a particular form leads to learning and automatization (that learners will learn what is taught in the order in which it is taught) no longer carries much credibility in linguistics or psychology. [...] Instead, the contemporary view of language development is that learning is constrained by internal processes. Learners do not simply acquire the language to which they are exposed, however carefully that exposure may be orchestrated by the teacher. (Skehan, 1996a: 18)

Indeed, SLA studies have shown that naturalistic and classroom L2 learners rarely acquire new and discrete linguistic forms instantaneously, one at a time or in a preordained order (see Ellis, 1994; Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Rutherford, 1988). Instead, learners seem to pass through clear developmental stages in their acquisition of grammatical forms (Meisel, Clahsen and Pienemann, 1981; Felix and Hahn, 1985). However, their progress towards native-like command of structures is not unidirectional or immediate, as much traditional

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grammar-based teaching has sought to achieve, but is characterised by stages of inauthentic target language use and backsliding, or ‘U-shaped’ behaviour (Selinker and Lakshamanan, 1992; and Kellerman, 1985) in which error frequency in the use of particular structures is first low, then high, then low again, as learners reorganise their existing knowledge to accommodate new knowledge. Thus English ‘brought’ or German ‘brachte’ may initially be used correctly when learnt as an unanalysed whole, but may then be followed respectively by *‘bringed’ and *‘bringte’ in learners’ development, as they learn and overgeneralise the ‘-ed’ and ‘-te’ past tense rules, until eventually the correct L2 forms are used again.

A further area of relevance to TBLT has been work on ‘focus on form’ in language instruction. Long (1991) distinguished ‘focus-on-formS’ from ‘focus-on-form’: while the former involves taking individual linguistic items out of context and isolating them for separate study as part of an *a priori* synthetic syllabus, in a focus-on-form approach to instruction, learners are involved first and foremost in meaning-based activities before any attention is paid to specific linguistic features (Long and Robinson, 1998). A primary communicative need, identified as part of meaning-based interaction, draws the learner’s attention to a formal aspect of the language and induces ‘noticing’ (Schmidt and Frota, 1986; Schmidt, 1990). The aim of form-focused tuition is thus to make linguistic forms salient so that learners can ‘notice the gap’ (Swain, 1995) which results from the mismatch between input (the target language ideal) and their own output (their current interlanguage). The key difference from a focus-on-formS approach is that this noticing of formal linguistic features occurs incidentally, or arises out of primarily meaning-focussed instruction, rather than being the principal concern of classroom activity.

Building on these insights from SLA and form-focussed approaches, TBLT aims to ensure learners are given plentiful opportunities both for meaningful input, or exposure to L2, and for language use, sometimes called ‘pushed output’, from which they will pick up or acquire those elements of language they are developmentally ready for. Linked to this is a focus on language form that arises from context (e.g. learners’ own output or native speaker models they subsequently hear), with a view to helping learners become aware of the particular linguistic features highlighted. The idea is that this will support them in the continual process of observing/noticing language features, hypothesising about how the language system works and experimenting with these new hypotheses (see Lewis, 1996).

Skehan (1996a: 20-22) argues that native language speech processing is very often lexical in nature (Lewis, 1993, 1996; Willis, 1990), i.e. it depends on whole phrases which are simply reproduced without any internal processing or attention to form. When under pressure to perform in real time, native speakers make use of this

‘lexicalised system’, but when they have more time and processing capacity they can also exploit a rule-governed system of language structures. In a similar way, when performing tasks, second language learners need to express meanings under time pressure and are therefore more reliant on lexicalised communication. Yet they are not forced or given any incentive to develop their command of language structure or to increase the sophistication or complexity of their language use. In TBLT the aim is to address this potential shortcoming by introducing elements after the task phase (see next section) that promote attention to language form.

The situation is not, however, a simple contrast between meaning and form. Skehan (1996b) sees the three key goals of language instruction as accuracy, complexity and fluency. No language speaker can attend to all these simultaneously, and emphasising one will almost always be at the expense of the other two. For this reason, instruction needs to ensure adequate attention is paid to all three, that fluency is not achieved at the expense of accurate language use and that this is not at the expense of developing a more complex language system. The challenge TBLT sets itself is to achieve an evenly distributed focus, a methodological framework that accommodates all three key variables.

A FRAMEWORK FOR TBLT

There is, as yet, no single TBLT ‘methodology’, but a number of different approaches have been suggested. Common to them all is a broad tripartite structure of pre-task, task and post-task phases. One of the most highly developed and certainly the most teacher-friendly models to date is that of Jane Willis. I shall take a brief look at each of the stages involved here to illustrate the approach. (The following is based on Willis, 1996a and 1996b; a detailed and highly accessible explication of the model is provided by Edwards, 2003).

Figure 1: The task cycle (based on Willis, 1996a: 38)

PRE-TASK	Introduction to topic and task
TASK CYCLE	Task Planning Report
LANGUAGE FOCUS	Analysis Practice

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1. In the pre-task phase, the teacher explores the topic with the class, highlights useful words and phrases and helps learners prepare for the task. Learners may hear a recording of others doing a similar task (but not so similar to act as a model for exact copying). There may be a brainstorming session on the topic or a pre-task exercise (e.g. odd-word-out exercise) but the teacher does not pre-teach new linguistic forms. If the task is based on a written text or a recording, learners may read or listen to some of it.

2. The task cycle is divided into three parts. First, in 'Task', learners perform the task in pairs or small groups. This may be in response to reading a text or listening to a recording. The teacher monitors from a distance but does not intervene to correct errors. The key thing is that learners focus on meaning in this phase, use language to exchange meanings for a real purpose, employing whatever language they choose or are capable of. The privacy of a small group is intended to build confidence.

In 'Planning', learners prepare to report to the whole class, either orally or in writing, how they performed the task, what they decided or discovered, how they resolved the problem, etc. The idea here is that we tend to use different language depending on the circumstances of communication. In preparing for a public presentation, learners will focus on organising their material, on clarity and accuracy, as opposed to the sole emphasis on fluency of the task phase. The teacher's role is to circulate and help learners polish their language. This phase may also involve use of dictionaries and reference works.

In 'Report', some groups present their reports to the class or exchange and compare written reports. The polished report might be recorded on audio or video for later playback, placed on a website or displayed in some other way (e.g. as a poster). The rest of the class listens or reads with a purpose (e.g. in order to fill in a questionnaire or to start a survey of some sort). The teacher chairs the session, commenting on reports and encouraging students. The idea is that learners gain practice in public, 'prestige' language use and that all learners are further exposed to spoken or written language. At the end of the 'Report' phase, learners might listen to a recording of a native speaker doing the same task so they can compare both their findings and their linguistic performance with that of proficient speakers.

3. The Language Focus phase consists of two parts. In 'Analysis', the teacher sets language-focussed tasks based on the texts students have read or on transcripts of what they have heard. For example: highlight all the verbs in the perfect tense and decide why each was

used; identify all the adjectives and classify the endings according to some criterion (e.g. agreement, case); underline all instances of a word type (e.g. modal verbs) and compare and contrast usage with a view to developing a hypothesis of how they are used.

During 'Practice', the teacher practises new words, phrases or patterns that occur in the data analysed. The idea is not that students will gain immediate command of these features but that by noticing them, they will recognise them when they meet them again in other texts.

The idea of starting with a task is to create an actual need for language to be used and for learners to identify what language they need in order to perform the task (cf. 'noticing the gap' idea above). There is then a gradual move to a greater focus on form with supported consciousness-raising and analysis. In this sense, the overall cycle is a bit like PPP in reverse order.

PROBLEMS WITH TBLT

As has been seen, the rejection of the PPP model on which so many contemporary language teachers base their approach is a major feature of TBLT. Typically, any structurally ordered syllabus is seen as acceptance of the proposition that languages can be learnt 'synthetically', i.e. one discrete element at a time. However, as Sheen (1994: 142-43) notes, this is a caricature. Language items are nowadays usually introduced in context, often via inductive processes, and though isolated for teaching and practice, they are normally then recombined with other elements, recontextualised and, in the best classrooms, subsequently recycled. If unproven consciousness-raising activities can have a role in preparing the ground for eventual acquisition, it is surely not impossible for some of the 'traditional' approaches employed in PPP to do the same job even more effectively.

Furthermore, while the linearity of PPP methodology and the incremental syllabus is difficult to defend in the light of insights from SLA which indicate that language learning is a far more complex affair, the PPP lesson plan and the traditional listing of lesson outcomes does, as Broady (2002) suggests, offer beginning teachers, in particular, a basic model and allows them to impose some order on what might otherwise appear to be an excessively chaotic business. Language teachers need to 'recognise the fiction of aims and objectives as **useful** fictions, as tools to help us think, act and reflect, rather than as representations of "the truth"' (Broady, 2002: 63).

Other criticisms of TBLT come from Bruton (2002a, 2002b) who argues that communicative tasks with monolingual learners lead to uneven oral development and that tasks that fail to provide adequate linguistic support are inappropriate for beginners. Such criticism is pertinent to the Bangalore Project (Prabhu, 1987) from which TBLT draws some of its inspiration.

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This experimental language programme, conducted in the context of a secondary school system in Southern India, was based on the hypothesis that structure could be learnt most effectively when the learner's attention was focussed on meaning. From this followed the decision to avoid both a linguistic syllabus (in preference for one based on tasks) and teaching that would focus attention in any significant way on form (e.g. error correction, grammar exercises). The project has been criticised (e.g. Beretta, 1989) for its poor results in the area of productive skills and for the degree of pidginisation it produced in learners.

The planning, report and language focus phases of the TBLT cycle are, of course, intended to avoid such shortcomings. However, the emphasis is on non-explicit forms of correction and on consciousness-raising activities. It is argued that this is a sufficiently effective method of priming learners' interlanguage in readiness for when it is developmentally ready to acquire the linguistic item. But what evidence is there for this? It seems a big issue for teachers to take on trust and to abandon the widely attested view of language as, at least in part, a process of skill acquisition (see below).

Another concern is that the type of negotiated oral interaction around which the task-based approach is built will inevitably result in learners being exposed to large amounts of non-native language input which will merely serve to confirm their current interlanguage representations (Bruton, 2002b). Similarly, the raw data from meaning-focussed tasks and their related listening and reading materials may be structurally or lexically limited, and, in the absence of a linguistic syllabus, coverage of the language's structures will be inadequate.

There are many other aspects of TBLT that, in the words of Richards and Rodgers (2001: 241), remain 'in the domain of ideology rather than fact'. Issues exercising researchers at present include how to classify task types and grade tasks; how to evaluate task performance; how to provide rigorous assessment using tasks; and, perhaps most challenging of all, how to design a task-based syllabus that would be acceptable in a mass education system. Work on these issues is ongoing (see Candlin, 2001; Chalhoub-Deville, 2001; Lynch and Maclean, 2000; Robinson, 2001; Skehan, 1998a: 98-120; Skehan, 2001; Swain and Lapkin, 2000; Wigglesworth, 2001) but it is fair to say that at present some of the proposals are speculative and experimental; indeed, like TBLT itself, many have still to be 'road-tested' and implemented on a broad scale.

TBLT AND LANGUAGE AS SKILL

TBLT has a lot to offer language teaching, but the approach to work on form that it proposes is problematic. In the language focus phase, the emphasis is usually on students finding, listing or

highlighting examples of a particular linguistic item and on sorting the items in an effort to identify patterns or regularity. This is an excellent inductive approach to grammar but it has its limitations. Secondary- and tertiary-level L2 learners learn languages differently from L1 and young L2 learners. Their language system is less receptive to naturalistic input, but conversely they are better able than younger L2 learners to attend to and learn from information about the language system. For these analytical skills to become operative, older learners need language knowledge to be presented in a clear context, and they need information about the parts to be related to the whole in a systematic way. For example, encouraging learners to list and categorise in a German text all instances of the verb *werden* is a useful initial step towards distinguishing passive use from formation of the future tense, but it does very little to help learners cope with the profusion of such passive forms as *wird gemacht*, *werden gemacht*, *wurde gemacht*, *ist gemacht worden*, *wird gemacht werden*, etc.

For proponents of TBLT such as Skehan (2002), language 'is a rule-governed system, where the apprehension of rules is the key, and any reliance on practice is of doubtful validity'; furthermore, 'learning is more likely to take place when individual learners, through engaging with naturalistic language material, notice things that are new, and then try to "fill the gap" that they have noticed' (Skehan, 2002: 294). Getting learners to notice language forms in context in this way and encouraging them to form hypotheses about language use are attempts to imitate the (long-term) L1 learning process and adapt them to the L2 classroom, but they fail to exploit sufficiently the L2 learner's greater (and more economic) capacity for schematising language knowledge, seeing where individual structures 'fit' in the language system and drawing connections between the parts. What is needed (in addition) is manipulation of structures and, above all, thorough practice, so that recall of forms under the pressure of real-time language use becomes automatic. This is not to suggest that what is taught is always or even sometimes learnt in the order in which it is taught, or that teachers can predict what individual learners will learn at any given moment, but rather that by frequently revisiting and recycling forms in a **systematic** way, instruction can help gradually to reshape learner interlanguage and, overall, can speed up the acquisition process. Being an essentially acquisition-based approach, TBLT implicitly rejects this view of language learning as a process of skill development (see, for example, Skehan, 2002: 290). Yet cognitive learning theory need not be seen as entirely inimical to the TBLT model.

In cognitive theory, acquiring a second language is the same as learning any complex skill: a range of sub-skills must be practised in 'controlled' processing until they can be integrated into automatic or fluent performance –

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in much the same way as we learn to play the piano, drive a car or juggle. The acquisition of these skills depends initially on explicit knowledge, but after a while we begin to use the particular skill without recourse to this knowledge of how to do it: we do not think about each individual finger-key combination, about changing gear or keeping the balls in the air, we just do it. This transition from conscious to less conscious performance has attracted much attention from cognitive psychologists.

The most influential model of skills acquisition has been Anderson's Adaptive Control Theory (Anderson, 1982, 1983). According to this, 'declarative knowledge', i.e. explicit knowledge (such as, in language learning, knowing that French verbs *aller* or *arriver* are used with the auxiliary *être* in the perfect tense), is the principal source of 'procedural knowledge', which is an encoding of behaviour and dictates the action to be taken in certain circumstances. When procedural knowledge is 'automatised' or fine-tuned, it is implicit and means, to return to our example, that we simply use *être* with *arriver* appropriately without having to focus conscious attention on rules of use. The move from declarative to procedural knowledge is achieved by engaging in the activity (e.g. talking about past events in French) while still depending on declarative knowledge (e.g. asking oneself whether this verb denotes motion or not). Through frequent repetition of such activities, a 'restructuring' of declarative knowledge occurs (McLaughlin, 1987) which helps learners to proceduralise the knowledge, allows elements of language to be combined into gradually larger chunks and thus reduces the burden on memory. Subsequent practice serves to automatise the procedural knowledge, steadily reducing the demand on cognitive processing, speeding up performance and reducing error.

Apart from this well-established declarative-to-procedural development, Johnson (1996) also sees a role for movement in the other direction. Krashen's notion of 'acquisition' represents, in effect, the direct proceduralisation of language, the situation where knowledge is already proceduralised and the forms simply enter the learner's interlanguage system directly. For example, instead of first learning the forms of *être* and which verbs require this auxiliary in the perfect tense, the learner acquires directly the forms *je suis arrivé(e)*, *ils sont allés*, etc. When such direct proceduralisation occurs, the forms quickly become automatised but they are also very difficult to alter, and there is therefore the risk of incorrect forms becoming proceduralised too, as happens, for example, within fossilised pidgin language. This inherent inflexibility is because the language knowledge is not part of the learner's 'data base' but is part of the production itself (Johnson, 1996: 99): the learner does not know **why** one says *je suis arrivé(e)*, he or she just **knows** it. This can be compared with the way some people

cannot describe routine actions but instead have to actually demonstrate them (e.g. one may struggle to explain complex keyboard or sub-menu routines on the computer but be able to perform them oneself without thinking about it).

In order to avoid the potentially negative effects of direct proceduralisation of knowledge, it is important to add declarative to procedural knowledge, that is, to tie the proceduralised language forms to a base of knowledge about the language, something that is crucial for L2 writing. Thus, the proceduralised perfect tense form *je suis arrivé(e)* might be supplemented by the forms *il est arrivé*, *nous sommes arrivé(e)s*, etc., contrasted with perfect tense forms involving auxiliary *avoir* and linked to past participle agreement rules.

To return to the PPP paradigm, the 'Presentation' stage is all about creating declarative knowledge, while 'Practice' and 'Production' are associated with proceduralisation. A 'normal' declarative-to-procedural learning sequence would equate with standard PPP, but the declarativisation of procedural knowledge outlined above is a reversal of this sequence. The movement in TBLT from communicative interaction to focus on form is **potentially** the same thing; following the exclusively meaning-based task, the emphasis needs to be on building learners' declarative knowledge of language forms and intensively practising them in support of proceduralisation.

However, the type of attention to form proposed by TBLT models (i.e. mere consciousness-raising activities), along with the avoidance of repetitive drilling and systematic coverage of linguistic items, are, at best, likely to benefit learners' accuracy and command of structure only in the long term. Language forms certainly require a period of 'incubation' between first being met and entering learners' interlanguage, but systematic coverage of grammar, repeated practice and formal explanations aimed at building declarative knowledge undoubtedly serve to speed up the process of automatisisation and accurate use. Teachers would be ill-advised to omit or downgrade them.

CONCLUSION

So what is the verdict on TBLT? It is, in one sense, not a major methodological change, requiring no new teaching techniques: language teachers familiar with the CLT approach and related classroom activities can feel at home in it. It is also based on sound principles and, most importantly, conforms better than many pedagogical models to what is known about SLA. Furthermore, it is a learner-centred approach which does not assume, like most traditional teacher-fronted approaches, that languages can be learnt through a 'one size fits all' lesson built exclusively around what the teacher thinks learners should learn at any given time. Nevertheless, as has been

**“The move
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seen, there remain problems and uncertainties.

A cautious response is to point to all those many highly successful learners whose classroom learning has been based exclusively on synthetic syllabuses. (Most readers of this article will fall into such a category.) On this evidence alone, it is clear TBLT has a lot more work to do before it can provide a convincing alternative pedagogical model, still more before it can claim superiority over other approaches. In particular, it needs to be shown to work on a large experimental scale and by ‘work’ I mean, *inter alia*, show an equally positive effect on receptive **and** productive skills. On this view, one might heed Cook’s (2001: 227-8) cautious counsel and see the eclecticism of the ‘mainstream style’, or the ‘soft’ version of CLT, as the steadiest methodological course to steer.

But there is another response. What we know about language learning strongly suggests the primacy of meaning negotiation supported by a focus on form, as proposed by TBLT. Since the idealised production phase in the traditional PPP framework tends to fall at least partly into the pre-communicative category (i.e. in most classrooms supposedly ‘free’ communication is usually more like display language), it may be sensible to suggest a reconfiguring of PPP, rather than outright rejection. If the task phase in TBLT is considered the equivalent of the production phase in PPP and the other two phases, presentation and practice, then **follow on** from it, pedagogical sequencing moves much closer to a model that accounts for what is known about the way second languages are learnt. Such a sequence retains the primacy of exposure to L2, as well as opportunities to engage in meaning-focused interaction in which learners’ interlanguage is exposed to the ‘push’ of real-time pressure of communication, but it also follows these up with systematic skills development, practice and reinforcement as part of an overall long-term process of declarativisation/proceduralisation, leading eventually to automatic production.

If it is possible to say anything with certainty about how languages are learned, it is surely that there is no single, all-encompassing model. Acquisition-based theories have much to tell us about the process, but so too do cognitive approaches. The hybrid model outlined above seeks to take account of what is known about both language acquisition and skills development. It addresses many of the shortcomings of communicative approaches mentioned at the start of this article. It acknowledges insights from SLA concerning the need for meaning-based interaction under real-time pressure, the limitations of the atomised structural syllabus and the inability of instruction to change the route of L2 development. But it also recognises the role of a cognitive approach to language learning and sees declarative knowledge of the language system and intensive practice of its structures as the most effective way to make forms marked or salient for learners and thus to speed up the acquisitional

process. It does not assume, like traditional language syllabuses, that linguistic forms can be learnt in a pre-ordained order over a short period of time. In such a model there would be no structural syllabus independent of the task syllabus, rather the forms to be practised would arise from the task context; but planning would be required to ensure grammatical structures were regularly revisited and recycled, especially those that were poorly represented in classroom input and task interaction.

TBLT in its strongest form sees tasks as a necessary **and sufficient** driver of language development and is too close to some aspects of first language acquisition to be appropriate for the foreign language learning context. A weaker version sees tasks as a necessary but not sufficient condition of SLA, believing they must be supplemented by form-focussed instruction that aims at functional, grammatical and lexical consciousness-raising. What I am arguing for is a weaker version still which accepts the primacy of the communicative focus but reinstates declarative knowledge and practice at the appropriate point in the task cycle.

Debates about methodology can sometimes be unsettling for practising teachers. They can cause them both to doubt their instinctive pedagogical approaches and to question the received knowledge that underpinned their initial education as teachers. This is no bad thing. If teachers are to aspire to be truly reflective practitioners, they need regularly to question their beliefs, intuitions and assumptions (see Edwards, 2001). Experienced classroom practitioners, in particular, are highly likely to have had their views on teaching reinforced over a number of years. These views are a key part of their self-concept as teachers but, being notoriously resistant to change, can lead to methodological ruts and a disinclination to re-assess classroom procedures. Yet part of being a professional is a willingness to engage with insights from research into learning and teaching, not a narrowly conceived, instrumental research that promotes spurious ‘best practice’ and merely serves to reinforce orthodoxies (see Pachler, this issue), but an exploratory and critical research that challenges perceptions and received wisdom. In engaging with such research, teachers weigh up the evidence, test it against ideas gleaned not only from their teacher training but also from their ‘apprenticeship’ of the classroom as learners (Lortie, 1975), and draw conclusions appropriate to their own unique teaching context.

Language teachers should see their professional education as consisting, amongst other things, in a constant questioning of methodology, in the knowledge that ‘there can be no “one best method”, however much research evidence supports it, which applies at all times and in all situations, with every type of learner’ (Mitchell and Myles, 1998: 195). Critical engagement with research into such topics as

communicative language teaching, task-based instruction and cognitive approaches to language learning is an essential part of this professionalism, and can lead to new perspectives on classroom practice, to keener insights into the learning process, in short, to teacher development in the true sense of the phrase.

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