Challenges of Task-based Language Teaching in Online and Blended Learning Contexts

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Abstract: Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a widely applied approach in second language education. The benefits and challenges of TBLT have been debated over the past thirty years. The advent of technology enhanced learning (TEL) and the use of TBLT in online and blended contexts have revealed further benefits and challenges with this approach. This study briefly summarises the historical background of TBLT, common approaches to TBLT and definitions of tasks. The paper then reviews recent literature relating to TBLT and TEL with specific reference to challenges involving student participation, negotiated meaning and focus on form. The study argues for a comprehensive reassessment of TBLT frameworks in order to address technology related challenges of the TBLT approach.

1 INTRODUCTION

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been a prominent approach to language teaching for over thirty years. Growing awareness of the limitations of more traditional second language teaching approaches such as Presentation, Practice and Performance (PPP), fostered an interest in the TBLT approach (Ellis, 2003). TBLT itself has its foundations in a range of learning theories (Hişmanoğlu and Hişmanoğlu, 2011) including information processing (Levelt, 1989), input processing (vanPatten, 1996), neo-Vygotskian sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2000) and the interactionist approach (Mackey, Gass and McDonough, 2006). The approach has strong affiliations with constructivist theories of learning and advocates a teaching methodology that aligns with communicative language teaching. Rather than seeing language acquisition as the internal processing of structural forms and lexical items (e.g. vocabulary words and phrases), TBLT emphasises the need to work through tasks with others in order to achieve outcomes with perceived real-world relevance and application. A primary focus is on meaning making, which again links to knowledge being socially constructed through meaningful engagement with others.

Generally not considered as a defined teaching method (Ellis, 2009), TBLT is a staged process in which communicative tasks provide the foundation of lesson and curricular aims (Nunan, 2004; Richards, 2005; Lai and Li, 2011). During tasks, the primary focus is on meaning making (Skehan, 1998a) as students work towards the completion of task objectives (Skehan, 1998b) through negotiated interactions with peers. The fundamental premise is that the negotiation of meaning within the context of authentic "real-world" tasks promotes the acquisition of language (Long, 1985; Samuda and Bygate, 2008).

In terms of classroom-based TBLT, there have been debates about TBLT aspects, including the most effective framework approach, the nature of tasks and the suitability of TBLT for all contexts.

The rapid growth in technology enhanced learning (TEL) has created a clear need to reassess the effectiveness of TBLT frameworks in TEL contexts with particular reference to overarching principles of the approach.

2 APPROACHES IN TBLT

Within the overall construct of TBLT, differing approaches have been put forward. Two of the most well-known approaches (Long, 1985; Skehan, 1998a) share a focus on authenticity, learner-centred small-group work and a marked contrast with traditional approaches such as grammar-translation

and audio-lingualism. There are several variations in these two approaches including in the treatment of grammatical structures, whereby firstly Long favours a corrective feedback stage and Skehan advocates pre-task structural input. Secondly, in terms of the type of task employed, Long uses both focussed and unfocussed tasks (i.e. tasks designed to promote the use of specific language features and structures and those designed to tap into learners' general linguistic resources) and Skehan uses unfocused tasks only. A third widely-acknowledged approach, that of Ellis (2003), can include teacher-centred elements and aspects of more traditional approaches, as well as the option of form-focused stages at any point in a TBLT lesson.

Regarding the nature of tasks, considerable debate has taken place on the definition of a task in this context. A task has been variously defined as "an activity or action which is carried out as a result of processing or understanding language" (Richards, Platt and Weber, 1985), "any structured language learning endeavour which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure" (Breen, 1987, p. 23), "an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information" (Prabhu, 1987, p. 24), "activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose" (Willis, 1996, p. 23) and "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 prepositional content has been conveyed" (Ellis, 2003, p.13). Common themes emphasised across task definitions include the primacy of meaning (Van den Branden, 2006 p. 6), the need to involve both linguistic and cognitive resources (Van den Branden, 2006 p. 8), nonlinguistic goals (Samuda and Bygate, 2008) and a clearly perceived relevance to 'real-world' activities (Long, 1985; Skehan, 1998a).

In the researcher's professional context, namely adult ESL learning in Canadian higher education institutions, the predominant language learning frameworks that underpin curricular design are the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR). The guiding principles of the CLB align closely with those of TBLT in several ways. These include descriptors of language proficiency in terms of 'can-do' statements, whereby competence in the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) is assessed according to performance in "communication tasks learners will likely encounter in the real world" (Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2012, p.16). In this Canadian context, given the close links of the two predominant language frameworks with TBLT plus the increasing use in ESL learning of TEL in classroom, blended and fully-online contexts, the need to investigate benefits and challenges of TBLT is growing.

When new teaching approaches emerge and challenge dominant paradigms, a degree of resistance is expected (Woodward, 1996). TBLT has been challenged on a number of fronts in both classroom and online contexts. This study sets out to examine recent views on the challenges of delivering effective TBLT practices in online contexts. The following research questions were formulated to inform this literature review: How do learner-related challenges with skills and knowledge affect the use of TBLT frameworks in online second language learning? What gaps exist in the literature relating to studies of perceived TBLT challenges in online second language learning contexts?

3 METHODOLOGY

This review of literature includes books, peer-reviewed journal articles and conference papers. Databases searched were ERIC, Google Scholar, The Digital Library for Education and Information Technology (EditLib), Science Direct and databases in the Onesearch catalogue of Lancaster University.

Keyword searches were conducted using combinations of the following: task-based, task-based learning, TBL, TBLT, ESL, EFL, ELT, CALL, computer-assisted language learning, CMC, computer-mediated communication, language acquisition, online and blended. Following this, searches of reference lists and bibliographical material were completed for further material.

4 BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF TBLT

Identified benefits of TBLT in classroom contexts include a range of positives such as increased learner autonomy (Demir, 2008), increased learning skills (Leaver and Kaplan, 2004), higher fluency and complexity levels in students following a TBLT curriculum (Rahimpour, 2008), higher degrees of participation and student-teacher rapport (Ruso, 2007), and enhanced creativity and improved self-esteem and social skills (McDonough and

Chaikitmongkol, 2007). Ellis (2009) details several TBLT benefits, including 'natural' learning, focus on meaning over form, motivational factors, learner focus and improved fluency.

A range of challenges have also been identified in classroom-based TBLT, including the need for teacher creativity and adaptability (Carless, 2007), student uncertainty concerning TBLT aims (Lopes, 2004), participation issues (Burrows, 2008), and learner progress in fluency rather than accuracy (Hatip, 2005).

4.1 Challenges in TEL-based TBLT

Following the advent of TEL in language teaching with its consequences for the design and delivery of TEL-based TBLT, a number of challenges have been identified. Key areas that relate directly to TBLT principles include participation and group dynamics, negotiation of meaning during interaction and questions regarding focus on form components. All of these challenges can negatively affect online collaborative tasks in TBLT, and the need for a comprehensive framework for TEL in TBLT has been put forward (Lai and Li, 2011).

4.1.1 Participation

Hampel and Hauck (2004) conducted a TBLT study as a component of an advanced German course. The TBLT items consisted of two 75-minute tutorials. Fifteen voluntary participants took part. Surveys revealed that the students were satisfied with the tasks, but teachers also identified reluctance to participate and decreasing task engagement. Given that the TBLT components involved only a small proportion of the course, this raises questions about teacher familiarity with maintaining interest in online contexts.

Similarly, Lai, Zhao and Wang (2011) carried out a larger scale TBLT study on thirty eight volunteer American high school students in an online Chinese language course for complete beginners. Students and instructors completed surveys and interviews. Several concerns with student participation were identified as tasks were dominated by small numbers of students and rapport was poorly established between geographically dispersed students. These factors relate to core principles of the social constructivist approach behind TBLT, thereby raising important questions about the need to maintain learner engagement and meaningful contributions to task completion throughout the TBLT cycle in TEL contexts. Key

recommendations from the study regarding student participation include a familiarisation process with TBLT principles and key linguistic features in text-based interactions in online environments.

The need for such far reaching strategies indicates that a fundamental shift in the learner approach to TBLT is often required when TEL is involved. This shift has clear implications for the overall framework that is used in the design and delivery of TBLT.

4.1.2 Negotiated Meaning and Interaction

In an exploratory study of sixteen Chinese EFL learners, Yu and Zeng (2011) investigated collaboration and relationship building in a task-based synchronous environment. From these tasks, online chats were analysed using quantitative and qualitative methods. The researchers argue that many studies of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) are situated in frameworks of interactionist theory (Blake, 2000) with the result that negotiated meaning is overemphasised to the detriment of the "collaborative dimension of peer interaction" (Yu and Zeng, 2011). The researchers draw a distinction between language acquisition through negotiated meaning and a more dynamic interaction situated in social communication. It is argued that negotiated meanings represent a reductionist view that simplifies the complexities of peer-interaction and fails to account fully for sociocultural theory (SCT) factors such as the joint ownership of collaboratively constructed interaction and language output (Ohta, 2000, p. 51).

The researchers also argue for task parameters to be extended in order to focus on the agency of the learners in constructing their own learning objectives through their interpretation and interactional adaptations of task boundaries (Roebuck, 2000). This proposed extension to TBLT adds weight to the need for framework adaptation in online contexts. In this way, teachers and learners should focus less on the controlling of task variables and difficulty by the instructor or designer, but instead should focus more on the collaborative interactions between learners that shape and mediate task procedures and objectives in the process of language development.

In the study, the learners, all of whom were familiar with online chatting and technology, completed a text reconstruction task, involving the addition and adaptation of function words and lexical items to produce a meaningful text. Findings from the study include the suggestion that off-task

talk may inadvertently contribute to successful task completion through its relationship building aspect. From a TBLT perspective, it could be argued that off-task communication has always been acknowledged as part of the approach given its roots in constructivist theory.

This study does highlight the potential of task-related talk to facilitate control over the task, but does not explain how the language generated in the task process may drive forward long-term language proficiency in spoken contexts. This transferability of communicative skills from a text-based context of acquisition to authentic fully synchronous 'real-life' oral proficiency has been called into question with many studies opting for the cautious view that such transferability may take place only incrementally (Chun, 1994; Hampel and Hauck, 2004). This cautiously optimistic view also points to the need for a reassessment of the claims for TBLT benefits in online or blended environments.

Additionally, the literature has so far shown little evidence that learners focus on metalinguistic factors during the TBLT cycle (Lee, 2002). This factor may be especially evident in SCMC (Collentine, 2009), possibly due to the additional task demands of synchronous communication with a depletion of paralinguistic features to facilitate the communication process. This aspect may relate especially to task demands in online contexts (Collentine, 2009). However, in Collentine's study, the thirty university student participants may not have been familiar with principles and expectations of TBLT regarding focus on form, since their normal programme is described as traditional and F2F. This may point to another common limitation of TBLT studies in TEL, as studies with online task-based curricula are often new and unfamiliar to learners. However, the lack of learner focus on available metalinguistic factors during the task cycle points to another challenge for effective TBLT use in TEL.

4.1.3 Focus on Form

The main TBLT frameworks all include a focus on form component. The general principles of TBLT include the premise that learners will notice errors and scaffold learning based on a combination of input, noticing, feedback and scaffolding.

Interestingly, the Yu and Zeng (2011) study used a traditional task of text reconstruction, from which the usual aim is a "meaningful and grammatically correct text" (Storch, 2002, p.125). The researchers claimed that their adaptations of the task meant that it meets the TBLT criteria of working in pairs;

producing a final product; and involving form and content (Swain, 2001). This type of focussed grammar task does have a place in TBLT frameworks (Ellis, 2009), but it may lack some authenticity in terms of relevance to real world tasks and in relation to focus on form (Long, 1991), because although students are aiming to create a grammatically correct text, the language deployed by learners is not subjected to any kind of form focus either by learners or instructors. However, later studies have found general evidence that SCMC in TBLT has the potential to induce learners to focus on form (Yilmaz and Granena, 2010), and therefore to address previous claims that a focus on form element is necessary for second language acquisition (Long, 1991).

Another study by Lai and Zhao (2006) focussed on noticing in text-based online chat communication relating to spot-the-difference tasks. As a comparison, participants also undertook a similar task face-to-face. The Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990) states that in language acquisition learners must first consciously notice incongruities between their own language production and input of the target forms. Noticing relates to TBLT in that there are elements of the task cycle during which it is expected that learners will identify salient features of language involving, for example, grammatical structure, lexical items and collocations, thereby helping learners to "systemise what they have observed about certain features of language, to clarify concepts and to notice new things" (Willis, 1996, p. 58).

In the study, English language learners were paired in dyads of mixed low-high language proficiency, a format intended to stimulate negotiated interactions. Results found that there were significantly more instances of self-correction in the online chat format. Also, learners indicated that they focussed more on self-correction methods in the online chat mode. However, there were more examples of negotiation of meaning between learners in the face-to-face tasks, whereas actual noticing by learners of these instances of negotiation of meaning was higher in the online environment. Various factors may account for these differences in the two modes including cognitive processing time, text permanency, paralinguistic clues and saliency of errors in the online environment.

More specifically in the study, noticing of recasts (an error correction technique designed to draw attention to errors of form, directly or indirectly, without interrupting communicative flow) by interlocutors was low in both online and face-to-

face contexts suggesting that learners are often unaware of this type of less explicit negotiation of meaning. This finding indicates that learners may benefit from explicit instruction about the types of feedback likely to be given by interlocutors. Also, it adds weight to the argument that teacher feedback on pertinent areas of form following tasks may be beneficial at this stage of the TBLT cycle in TEL contexts. For this study, it should also be noted that a third of the participants in the study had no previous experience of online chatting and none of the participants had previously used the chat software. The study indicates that a TBLT methodology using online chat may promote the noticing of learners' own mistakes, a finding also put forward in other studies (Abrams, 2003; Smith 2004).

However, as noted previously, the question remains as to whether the noticing of errors in online chat is an effective means of promoting error identification and correction in face-to-face communication. Some studies have shown evidence of successful uptake, (generally defined either as learner reports of a lesson [Slimani, 1989] or as a reaction to feedback where language output may be modified [Lyster and Ranta, 1997]). For example, a study of English language learners by Shekary and Tahririan (2006) found evidence that uptake based in online text interactions was a strong indicator of successful responses in subsequent testing, although again this should not be viewed as clear evidence of long-term language acquisition.

5 CONCLUSIONS

A number of challenges to the use of a TBLT approach in online environments have been identified. Some of the main areas include factors concerning student participation, familiarity and acceptance with TBLT principles and related methodologies, and the position of grammar teaching and a focus on form in the task cycle. Concerns about participation and the role of grammar may often relate to a lack of familiarity with the overarching principles of TBLT. This suggests that some challenges surrounding participation and grammar may be alleviated by greater awareness and familiarity with TBLT principles. Also, studies of TBLT in which learners and instructors are already familiar with the approach would likely benefit from having these limitations reduced. Similarly, ensuring that learners are equipped with basic linguistic resources to

participate in online communication environments would also offset some participation challenges. For TBLT principles, this remains an area that is unfamiliar to many students and instructors. Given that the TBLT approach already has several variations, further options afforded by TEL environments may increase the range of frameworks. In either case, there is a clear need for a general framework that integrates TBLT with TEL. Likewise, given the growth of TBLT as the adopted approach in second language learning and the ongoing spread of TEL in all areas of education, there is a clear need for TBLT and TEL to be included in the curricula of initial language teacher training programmes. This study indicated the strong affiliations of TBLT with social constructivism; connections which are also mentioned in relation to several studies in the literature. For future research, applying social constructivism as a theoretical lens through which to examine the use of TBLT in TEL contexts may provide further insights into addressing the challenges of TBLT frameworks in second language learning using technology.

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