

# Why TBLT?

TBLT (sometimes called task-based instruction, or TBI) has received a lot of attention from researchers and educators in the last few decades, and its implementation has been an important educational policy initiative around the world. Several countries, such as China, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, New Zealand, Vietnam, and Canada, have introduced TBLT, formally or informally, as a language teaching method to help improve language learning outcomes.

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), introduced in Europe, describes what learners “can do” using the language they are learning at different stages of their language learning process. The CEFR has been translated into 37 languages to date and has been influential beyond its original context of Europe. The CEFR uses “can do” statements to describe language use across five language skills: listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing. Even though the CEFR does not advocate any particular teaching method, its principles and action-oriented approach lend themselves to a task-based language teaching approach (Little, 2006). The influential nature of TBLT is further demonstrated through the findings of a large-scale study that examined teacher reactions to CEFR’s task-based approach in French as a second language classrooms in Canada (Faez, Taylor, Majhanovich, Brown, & Smith, 2011), revealing

teachers' positive attitudes toward using such activities. As a result of implementing task-based activities, teachers' estimates of their students' abilities to use the target language increased.

The popularity of TBLT stems from the belief that it is an effective way to engage learners in language learning by providing them with opportunities for authentic use of language in the classroom. Indeed, tasks can provide frameworks that support many of the key elements understood to enhance language acquisition and facilitate effective instruction: negotiation of meaning, output hypothesis, and learner autonomy (Shehadeh & Coombe, 2010).

- *Negotiation of meaning*: Although Long (1985) emphasizes the importance of language input that is understood by the learner, he notes that exposure to the language is not sufficient. Equally important are opportunities to interact and negotiate meaning, which draw learners' attention to properties of the language that are essential for language learning. TBLT provides opportunities for comprehensible input and negotiation of meaning.
- *Output hypothesis*: Swain (1995, 2000) emphasizes that learner output of the target language plays a significant role in the language acquisition process. She argues for *collaborative dialogue* that promotes interaction and dialogue with others in the classroom. TBLT emphasizes interaction and provides excellent opportunities for collaborative dialogue.
- *Learner autonomy*: Recent language teaching approaches emphasize the importance of learner autonomy—learners' ability to take charge of their own learning (Little, 2011). TBLT provides rich opportunities for promoting learner autonomy in the classroom.

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- What is your understanding of TBLT? What have been your experiences with it?
- What excites you about this approach to language teaching? What concerns you about this approach?

## History of TBLT

TBLT is not a new approach to language teaching. For example, Prabhu used a task-based approach in secondary classrooms in India as early as 1979. TBLT emerged as a result of applied linguists' and language teachers' dissatisfaction with traditional methods in which language was predominantly taught explicitly and decontextualized as a system of rules and elements such as grammar and vocabulary. There were concerns that these approaches were inconsistent with how people really learn a language (e.g., Long, 1985). Learners were exposed to uncommon language examples and were expected to produce error-free language at a very early stage. Traditional methods of teaching often resulted in learners' knowing the rules but not knowing when or how to apply them in context. In natural processes of language learning, such as children learning their first language or adult immigrants learning a second language outside of school, individuals do not, for the most part, learn language rules. Instead, they learn how to use the language to communicate their intended message and to exchange and understand ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

The introduction of communicative competence and communicative language teaching (CLT) in the 1970s emphasized the shift to base language teaching on communication in social contexts. Several advancements in understanding the nature of language and its acquisition over the years led to what we now call the communicative approach. Language teaching methods are generally informed by a theory of language and a theory of learning (Richards & Rogers, 2001). The theory of language identifies what constitutes language in that approach, and the theory of learning identifies how language is learned. CLT has been described as an approach and not a method (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) since it provides a broad theoretical position about the nature of language (communicative competence), but not much attention has been given to a theory of learning.

TBLT is an extension of CLT in that its theory of language is similar to CLT but provides much more attention to the theory of learning. The underlying principles about the nature of language in TBLT can be summarized as follows:

- Language is a means of communication even if limited linguistic resources are used.
- Language is a means for making meaning.

- Language is a tool for attaining real-world goals.
- Lexical chunks are essential to communication and language learning, emphasizing the significance of vocabulary knowledge and formulaic chunks.

In TBLT, a theory of learning is informed by psycholinguistics, interactional, and sociocultural principles (Robinson, 2003; Skehan, 2018). Here are some of the key tenets of the TBLT perspective on learning:

- Interaction and negotiation of meaning through tasks provide rich opportunities for language learning.
- Language learning is, at least to some extent, an internal process where meaning is constructed by the learner, not the teacher.
- Using existing cognitive, social, and pedagogic resources effectively promotes learning.
- Language learning develops gradually.
- Language learning is facilitated when learners' attention is on completing goal-oriented, real-world activities.
- Learning takes place by doing. Tasks provide opportunities for learning by practicing communicative uses of language.
- Tasks help learners notice the gap in their language knowledge and skills.
- Tasks enhance learners' confidence and willingness to communicate.

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- Which principle(s) about the nature of language in TBLT draws your attention? Why?
- How might assumptions about how language is learned influence language instruction?

## What is TBLT?

TBLT has drawn, to a great extent, on the findings of research in second language acquisition. There is general agreement among second language

acquisition researchers and teacher educators that instruction is most effective when its focus is primarily meaning-based and supplemented by timely attention to language forms. As such, tasks provide many opportunities for meaningful communication and language use. Similar to CLT, TBLT has been interpreted differently by scholars, and it may mean different things to different people. In essence, however, TBLT is a language teaching approach in which the focus of instruction is using language to do meaningful tasks that resemble the type of activities learners need to do in their real life. While the correct use of language is important and expected to emerge gradually, in TBLT the priority is being able to communicate meaning in a way that the intended message is understood despite learners' limited knowledge of the language. D. Willis and Willis (2007) argue that one of the most valuable aims of TBLT is to give learners "the confidence and willingness to have a go, even if their language resources are limited" (p. 2).

Here are some of the key principles of TBLT:

- Students' needs are central to determining the content of the curriculum.
- Communicative tasks are the key unit for language teaching and learning.
- Learners learn the language by using it.
- Meaning-making should be the primary focus of instruction.
- Focus on form is secondary to meaning and should be provided as needed.
- Tasks are classroom activities that resemble the type of activities learners need to do in their lives outside the classroom.

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- What are some of the strengths of TBLT?
- What are some of the potential weaknesses of TBLT?
- What are some of the challenges of implementing TBLT in your context? How can you overcome these challenges?