

TBLT | Task-Based Language Teaching

INTRODUCTION

TBLT stands for **Task-Based Language Teaching** (also known as **Task-Based Learning** and **Task-Based Instruction**) and it refers to an approach to language teaching that views **tasks** (language activities focused on meaning, like telling an anecdote, planning a party, etc.) as the central units of instruction (as opposed to a pre-determined set of grammatical or functional-notional items). It's an approach situated within **experiential learning theory** (learning by doing), **sociocultural learning theory** (interaction as the basis for learning and language as a communicative activity), **whole language learning** (language as a 'whole' entity instead of isolated parts), and **learner-centered instruction** (instruction based on learners' priorities).

TBLT is often seen as an extension of the **communicative approach** (meaningful and authentic communication and interaction as the goal of instruction).

Within TBLT, there are **different** views and approaches. These are often labelled as:

- **task-based**: a 'strong' version advocating a syllabus exclusively made of tasks
- **task-supported**: a 'weak' version in which tasks can be the carriers of pre-determined language items

Definitions of **'task'** vary among authors, although some of the recurrent **properties** include the following:

- a task should be mainly **focused on meaning** and learners should be concerned with comprehending and producing language for a communicative purpose (e.g. solving a problem, a gap in communication, etc.)
- a task should promote **real-world language use** and learners should experience language as it is used in everyday communication (e.g. at home, at work, etc.)
- a task should actively **engage cognitive processes** so that learners will be able to 'process' language at deeper intellectual level (e.g. problem solving, reasoning, etc.)
- a task should have a clear **communicative outcome** and learners should be focused on achieving the outcome – as opposed to displaying correct language (e.g. telling a story instead of showing mastery of a verb tense)

These properties are often used to **distinguish** a language task from a more traditional **exercise** (e.g. an activity designed to promote the use or manipulation of language forms such as gap-fills, sentence transformation, etc.).

Tasks are also generally characterized by the following **features**:

- **real-world**: tasks aimed at replicating authentic situations and interactions (e.g. making a hotel booking)
- **pedagogic**: tasks aimed at 'inviting' the use of specific language features (e.g. finding differences between two pictures)
- **focused**: tasks designed with a specific language focus in mind
- **unfocused**: tasks designed without a specific language focus in mind
- **open-ended**: tasks that accept any solution (e.g. ranking countries in order of preference)
- **closed-ended**: tasks that accept a fixed solution (e.g. ranking countries in order of size)
- **input**: tasks that promote language reception (e.g. listening and tracing a route on a map)
- **output**: tasks that promote language production (e.g. telling a story)
- **one-way**: tasks that promote individual language use (e.g. making a presentation - monologic)
- **two-way**: tasks that promote interactive language use (e.g. agreeing on an issue - dialogic)

Factors that influence the **complexity** of a task (and their **sequence/grading**) can be said to broadly involve:

- **linguistic** demands (e.g. language needed to complete the task and whether any input is provided)
- **conceptual** demands (e.g. amount of reasoning needed to complete the task)
- **performance** demands (e.g. familiarity with task and prior rehearsal/planning time involved)

Tasks can be **classified** in various ways, often according to:

- **operations** (e.g. listing, comparing, problem-solving, etc.)
- **genre** (e.g. recipes, job interviews, social media posts, etc.)
- **cognitive processes** (e.g. information-gap, reasoning-gap, opinion-gap, etc.)
- **learning opportunities** (e.g. interaction, language noticing, output, etc.)

A typical TBLT lesson will minimally include the performance of a task (**main task**), although this is often complemented by activities to scaffold this task (**pre-task**) and activities to enrich it (**post-task**). The following are examples of some of the **options** available.

PRE-TASK	MAIN TASK	POST-TASK
Understand the task context and objectives Analyze a model of others performing the task Analyze language useful for the task Perform same/similar task Plan/rehearse how to perform the task	Perform the main task	Analyze a model of others performing the task Analyze/practice language used in the task Report the outcomes of the task to others Perform same/similar task Reflect on task performance and areas for improvement

The performance of the main task also includes other **options** such as:

Input

- performing the task without access to any input data (i.e. relying solely on personal resources)
- perform the task with access to some input data (e.g. referring to pictures, texts, etc.; borrowing* language examined in pre-task phase, etc.)

Time

- performing the task under time pressure (to promote fluency)
- performing the task without time pressure (to promote accuracy)

Surprise

- introducing a 'surprise element' midway while performing the task (e.g. learners plan the menu for a dinner party. In the middle of the task, they are told that some of the guests are vegetarian)

The role of grammar instruction and other 'rule-driven' activities varies among different versions of TBLT, although authors agree that **raising awareness** of **language form** and providing **language-related feedback** are useful. These can be:

- pre-emptive**: taking place in the pre-task phase
- immediate**: taking place during the main task phase
- delayed**: taking place in the post-task phase
- implicit**: covert (e.g. requests for clarification, reformulations, recasts of errors, etc.)
- explicit**: overt (e.g. explicit corrections, questions or comments using metalanguage, queries about form, reminders of useful language, clarifications of rules or patterns, etc.)

BENEFITS & CHALLENGES

The following is a (non-exhaustive) list of commonly mentioned benefits and challenges.

BENEFITS

- it may better reflect natural language learning
- it may establish the importance of meaning over form
- it may promote language creativity and experimentation
- it may provide more authentic contexts for language input and output
- it may increase the amount of interaction and language use
- it may contribute to an increase in fluency, accuracy and complexity
- it may offer opportunities for implicit and incidental learning
- it may better respond to learners' emergent needs
- it may increase learner-centeredness and learner independence
- it may be motivating for learners to complete real-life tasks

*borrowing refers to 'taking over' a sample of language independently and voluntarily (i.e. the learner chooses to do so); this is contrasted to 'taking over' a sample of language arbitrarily because of 'some external authority' (e.g. the teacher imposes the use).

CHALLENGES

- it may be challenging for the teacher to design and implement appropriate tasks
- it may be challenging for teachers to relinquish control
- it may be challenging for teachers to identify needs and decide what to teach
- it may be inappropriate in context where 'formal' instruction is expected
- it may be challenging for learners who are more rule- and teacher-dependent
- it may promote fluency at the expense of accuracy and complexity
- it may promote language avoidance and reliance on what learners already know
- it may foster 'fossilization' of errors if corrective feedback is not provided
- it may require adaptation of course book material and creation of additional resources
- it may be challenging to design assessment measures and evaluate progress

FRAMEWORKS, PLANNING & TASKS

For more information on different perspectives in TBLT, please refer to the following handout:

- **TBLT Frameworks**

For more information on how to plan a TBLT lesson, please refer to the following handout:

- **Lesson Frameworks & Planning Processes – TBL Speaking**
- **Lesson Frameworks & Planning Processes – TBL Writing**

For more information on task types, please refer to the following handout:

- **TBLT Task Types**

TEACHING TIPS

- Tasks should have a connection with the *real world* (e.g. making a hotel booking) but they can also be of a *pedagogic* nature (e.g. finding differences between two pictures). *Pedagogic* tasks should also provide opportunities for *authentic interaction* (i.e. learners are engaged in meaningful communication with clear objectives).
- Tasks can be *input-based* (e.g. listen and trace a route on a map) and *output-based* (e.g. tell a story). Some can be *one-way* tasks (e.g. a learner gives a description) while others can be *two-way* (e.g. learners must agree on the most important items on a list). *One-way* tasks can be generative in relation to output and can benefit comprehension, provided the 'listener' has a specific task while the 'speaker' performs the task. *Two-way* tasks can be more effective in relation to the negotiation of meaning, simply because of the interactive nature of communication between two (or more) interlocutors.
- Tasks can be *focused* (i.e. designed to invite the use of specific language items): e.g. write about an embarrassing incident that happened to you – narrative tenses. Other tasks can be *unfocused* (i.e. designed without a specific language focus in mind): e.g. decide on the best action to reduce traffic in your city – language is more difficult to predict. It's important to remember that when working on *focused* tasks, learners shouldn't be told about the language focus or they will perceive the task as a language exercise and will focus on manipulating and displaying specific language structures rather than completing the task with whatever linguistic resources they have at their disposal.
- Teachers should be aware that language *accuracy* (i.e. producing grammatically correct sentences) and *fluency* (i.e. producing language effectively and efficiently in real time) are both desirable features. However, teachers should also consider *complexity* (i.e. producing more elaborate and structured sentences) as a measure to evaluate the success of the learning experience. *Complexity* indicates the re-structuring and upgrade of one's language system: this is an essential process in learning a language.
- Teachers should offer opportunities to *focus on form* (i.e. draws the learners' attention, implicitly or explicitly, to linguistic aspects of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation that may help learners improve the way they convey or negotiate meaning). In pre-task stages, this can take the form of *noticing* activities in which the learners are made aware of linguistic devices 'useful' for completing the task (e.g. useful structures, vocabulary, communication strategies, etc.). In the main-task stages, the teacher can direct the learners' attention to language via *immediate* corrective feedback (e.g. via recasts, reformulations, reminders, etc.). In the post-task stages, the teacher can provide *delayed* language-related feedback based on the learners' output and/or ask learners to work on *consciousness-raising* activities (e.g. a problem-solving task to work out grammatical rules from examples, comparing different ways of expressing the same idea, etc.).

- Teachers should also encourage learners to reflect on the learning experience and identify personal objectives, successes and areas for improvement.
- TBLT should be relevant to learners' needs and wants. Tasks should be designed according to these necessities and desires, and teachers should consider the learners' performance in a particular task to inform the design of another.

FURTHER READING

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