

FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

Martin East's essential bookshelf: Task-based language teaching

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(Received 18 April 2022; accepted 20 April 2022)



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My own research interest in task-based language teaching (TBLT) sits principally in the PRACTITIONER RECEPTION space. This interest has been shaped by my own experiences, in particular as a high-school language teacher many years ago in the UK, and subsequently as a language teacher educator in New Zealand. These experiences have revealed to me the complexities involved in the task-based endeavour and influence what I would regard as essential reading for anyone wishing to gain a broader, deeper and, importantly, historically-located understanding of what TBLT is and entails, and the challenges it faces.

My passion for language learning (French and German) developed at school in the 1970s. This was a time when more traditional pedagogical approaches represented by grammar-translation and audio-lingualism were beginning to give way to greater innovation in the form of communicatively-oriented programmes. By the early 1980s, when I first became a TEACHER of languages, so-called Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was certainly influencing many teachers' thinking, if not their practices. Benson and Voller (1997, p. 10) neatly encapsulated the spirit of the times – '[t]he question ceased to be, "Should we be teaching languages communicatively?" and became, "How do we teach languages communicatively?"' Implicit in my own understanding of the 'how' was the notion that 'language exists for purposes of REAL communication with REAL individuals in REAL contexts' (East, 2008, p. 14).

TBLT as a distinct expression of CLT originally emerged in the 1980s, just when I was starting out in language teaching, as a learner-centred and experiential attempt to promote authentic language use in classrooms through tasks. However, 'task' was not part of the repertoire of concepts to which I was exposed during my time in the UK. It was not until I began working in an initial teacher education programme at the University of Auckland that my awareness of TBLT became explicit. A revised national curriculum for New Zealand's schools had just been released (2007), bringing a focus on learners' active and collaborative involvement in their own learning. Rod Ellis (a university colleague at the time) had previously published a substantial text on TBLT (Ellis, 2003). The task construct he had proposed, alongside a literature-informed set of principles for language pedagogy that Ellis had

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been commissioned to write,¹ came to influence thinking in the school sector to a considerable extent. I began to wrestle with what TBLT could mean in and for the language classroom in light of curriculum revision. It seemed to me that, in the context, TBLT was potentially ‘an ideal operationalisation of CLT’ (East, 2018, p. 25).

As a teacher educator, I began to promote TBLT and tasks to my beginning teacher students. However, in many ways TBLT ‘counters our traditions of practice, requires rethinking the outcomes of our programs, and implies an overhaul of the teaching and testing that is going on in many language classrooms’ (Norris, 2009, p. 591). My students’ reception of TBLT ideas was often ambivalent, leading me to revisit some of my original assumptions about TBLT and to consider what might need to change for TBLT to become more successfully embraced.

The selection of essential readings that follows includes those that I have required of my students or that I would recommend because they focus on getting to grips with the range of fundamental issues that TBLT attempts to confront and resolve, in particular with regard to TBLT in practice. My more empirically-oriented applied linguistics colleagues may well make different choices. As I see it, however, if TBLT cannot be shown to work at the level of the classroom, the findings of empirical research are not actually taking us very far. From that standpoint, I offer my selection.

Key issues for TBLT in practice

(1) Skehan, P. (1996). A framework for the implementation of task-based instruction. *Applied Linguistics*, 17(1), 38–61.

Peter Skehan’s work has had a seminal influence on both research into second language acquisition (SLA) and the pedagogical practices of TBLT. This think piece presents cogent reflection on the phenomenon of TBLT at a relatively early stage in its conceptualisation and development. What principally resonated with me in this article, and continues to do so, is its early recognition that there is more than one way of ‘doing TBLT.’ When I first started out with exploring TBLT with my students, I presented it as what I believed was the most suitable way to meet the learner-centred and experiential emphases of a revised curriculum. As my students began to express some reservations about this positioning of TBLT as they encountered resistance from some colleagues in schools, I soon realised that my students needed to see that TBLT can in fact be a more accommodating framework. The particular importance of this article, from my perspective, is its acknowledgment of stronger and weaker forms of TBLT; that is, versions of TBLT where the task is the central focus of learner-centred classroom activity, and versions of TBLT that allow for the task or tasks to be surrounded by more structured and teacher-led input in both the pre-task and post-task phases of a lesson.

Just as I encountered early questioning around TBLT from my students, Skehan was writing at a time of initial criticisms, lack of clarity and evolving fragmented views around exactly what TBLT was. As Skehan (1996, p. 58) put it, TBLT represents:

... an attempt to address one of the dilemmas of language teaching – how, on the one hand, to confront the need to engage naturalistic learning processes, while, on the other, to allow the pedagogic process to be managed in a systematic manner.

The article proposes a framework for the pedagogical implementation of TBLT and confronts the tensions around the specific roles of learners and teachers in classrooms.

Additionally, the place and nature of attention to accuracy (or how a focus on the forms of language should be attended to) is explored. Skehan made reference to the so-called complexity-accuracy-fluency (CAF) triad as a useful way of conceptualising the components that need to find expression in the communicative classroom, and problematised how each element may be realised. In essence,

¹See: <http://seniorsecondary.tki.org.nz/Learning-languages/Pedagogy/Principles-and-actions>

Skehan acknowledged at the outset that different forms or flavours of TBLT exist. For a range of reasons, this continues to be the case, and I think this is okay.

(2) Willis, J. (1996). Aspects of tasks. In *A framework for task-based learning* (pp. 23–37). Longman Pearson Education.

Another challenge that I began to encounter with my students revolved around struggles to understand exactly what a task was for the purposes of TBLT, and how to differentiate a task from other kinds of language practice activities that teachers might draw on. This lack of clarity was not necessarily surprising. The task construct had certainly not been made clear to me as a young language teacher, and Skehan (1996) accepted the challenges inherent in defining something as a task. This chapter by Jane Willis, who ranks among the leaders of TBLT in the practitioner space, represents a contemporary parallel to Skehan's more academically-oriented discussion. It also provides a valuable starting point for articulating several important elements of tasks, which I have used successfully as a springboard for discussion with my own students.

Among the earliest articulators of the task construct was Prabhu (e.g., 1987), who classified tasks into three types of potentially increasing complexity (information gap, reasoning gap and opinion gap). Willis's chapter develops this essential conceptualisation. Beginning from the premise that a task requires reaching some kind of goal or outcome beyond just a focus on language, Willis introduced six broad task categories, arguably loosely graded from less to more complex. For example, at the least complex end comes a straightforward task whose goal is some kind of list (e.g., a shopping list of ten food and drink items to buy for an end-of-term party); at the most complex are creative tasks or projects that may include a range of task types with various proposed goals. Key parameters within which tasks might operate are closed (one outcome) and open (a variety of outcomes), or somewhere in between. The chapter concludes by articulating how tasks may be introduced or sequenced as part of a lesson.

In East (2021), I suggested that in TBLT the task is crucial. If we can get the task right, and have a level of confidence in the task's fit against a theoretical definition, we are at least half way towards putting a pedagogical approach into practice that can truly be called TASK-BASED. I see this chapter by Willis as particularly important because it provides an essential source of initial ideas for tasks that still has relevance today, and that both practitioners and researchers can draw on.

(3) Long, M. (2000). Focus on form in task-based language teaching. In R. D. Lambert & E. Shohamy (Eds.), *Language policy and pedagogy: Essays in honor of A. Ronald Walton* (pp. 179–192). John Benjamins.

Alongside Skehan, Mike Long represents one of the foremost thinkers and theorists in the field of TBLT. His untimely passing from illness in February 2021 was a significant, sad and unanticipated loss for the TBLT community. This chapter gets to the heart of Long's view on how accuracy might be attended to most effectively in TBLT. Addressing grammar in the task-oriented classroom was one of the issues of contention that began to arise as I explored TBLT with my students. When it comes to grammar pedagogy in language classrooms, a widespread reality was succinctly expressed by Larsen-Freeman (2015, p. 263) – practice 'remains traditional for the most part, with grammar teaching centered on accuracy of form and rule learning, and with mechanical exercises seen as the way to bring about the learning of grammar.' This was certainly a tendency I was familiar with and could identify with from my younger language teaching and learning days. My beginning teacher students often seemed to share this perspective and were anxious that a focus on learner-centred and experiential tasks would detract significantly from language students' learning of the rules (see also East, 2017).

Long rehearsed three perspectives on grammar instruction: focus on forms (FonFS), focus on meaning (FonM) and focus on form (FonF). FonFS represents the traditional teacher-led expository approach to grammar pedagogy that foregrounds grammar ahead of any communicative activity.

FonM, by contrast, represents a learner-centred zero grammar approach whereby learners are expected to work out the rules for themselves simply by exposure to target language input. Long dismissed both these approaches as lacking. FonF, which Long described as being the most compatible with TBLT, allows for learner noticing of forms in the input as they engage in task completion, alongside direct feedback on those forms and how they are used or being misused. Notably, attention to form is made on the basis of breakdowns in communication, rather than being pre-planned. This approach creates an important link with Long's interaction hypothesis (see, e.g., Long, 1996), which proposes that face-to-face interaction, alongside the negotiation of meaning and corrective feedback that accompany it, drives SLA forward.

Crucially, in my experience with my students, the chapter can be used as an impetus not only to consider alternatives to a traditional approach to grammar (important in light of Larsen-Freeman's observation) but also to explore and reflect on the merits AND demerits of different approaches to grammar teaching (important when considering alternatives that are perceived as more radical).

(4) González-Lloret, M. & Ziegler, N. (2022). Technology-mediated task-based language teaching. In M. Ahmadian & M. Long (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of task-based language teaching* (pp. 326–345). Cambridge University Press.

The emergence of COVID 19 and the switch to online learning in many places across the world have highlighted the need for teachers to upskill in using technology for pedagogical purposes. However, well before the COVID crisis, a good number of practitioners have been exploring and experimenting with technologically-facilitated language learning. I remember my first sojourn into using an interactive software package for language teaching and learning, over 20 years ago, and recognising the opportunities for independent learning and language practice that the technology could offer. Certainly, the young language learners I taught seemed to find the computer programme motivating, and the teachers I have worked with have been very open to uncover how technology can be used to enhance language learning. I believe, therefore, that a repertoire of essential readings must include something that engages readers with the interface that can exist between technology and TBLT. This chapter by González-Lloret and Ziegler does just that.

This chapter provides an opportunity to highlight two essential readings in one. That is, the edited volume by Ahmadian and Long represents a very recent significant publication that includes a range of chapters on a host of issues relevant to TBLT, alongside case studies that illustrate these issues in practice. In the contribution I have selected here, González-Lloret and Ziegler acknowledged the exponential growth in technology use over the last 20 or so years, and its increasing inclusion in language teaching and learning programmes. This, they argued, has occurred alongside 'almost seamless integration of technology into nearly all aspects of our lives, with many learners having come of age using mobile phone applications, text messaging, social media, gaming, and augmented and virtual reality for everyday tasks' (2022, p. 326). From a task-based perspective, a significant advantage of technology that the authors recognised is that it enables language learners to take part in authentic interactions with other target language speakers in various ways (e.g., social networking), without the restraint of physical location. A strength of this chapter is that the authors went on to consider, explore and describe the kinds of authentic tasks that language learners at a variety of levels could engage in online. The chapter also outlines several avenues for research that have been explored, alongside their findings. Importantly, clear links are made back to established theoretical definitions of the task construct, thereby helping to solidify the construct in both theory and practice.

(5) Norris, J. (2016). Current uses for task-based language assessment. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 36, 230–244.

I believe that, if the task-based endeavour is to be successful, there needs to be a clearly articulated interface between the kinds of tasks that teachers use to promote SLA and the kinds of tasks that

are used to measure proficiency – a constructive alignment between learning and assessment (see, e.g., Biggs, 2003). When I was teaching languages in the UK, high-stakes assessment reforms in the 1990s brought in welcome changes, such as writing coursework and dictionary use, both of which enabled a greater level of authenticity and a stronger alignment between learning and assessment than a timed writing test. By contrast, when I first came to New Zealand at the turn of the century, I was alarmed to discover that school-based language assessment at that time relied quite heavily on translation in test conditions. Norris's article explores the emergence of so-called task-based language assessment (TBLA) as an alternative to traditional testing.

Constructive alignment is good in theory. In practice, two issues stand out for me. First, and despite several radical changes to assessment in New Zealand that had moved some aspects to more task-based and teaching-embedded opportunities, notably in speaking (see East, 2016), my own students complained that assessments of the receptive skills of reading and listening were only nominally task-based. Second, washback from non-task-based assessments was potentially negative – that is, beginning teachers felt constrained with regard to TBLT as a pedagogical approach when tasks were inadequately represented in some assessment instruments. Norris's article tackles these crucial issues by outlining what tasks for a range of assessment purposes could look like, thereby meriting a place on my Essential Bookshelf.

As a starting point, Norris acknowledged that the established psychometric tradition of large-scale, norm-referenced tests has been challenged in recent decades by increasing advocacy for alternative forms of assessment, such as TBLA. As Norris observed, language testing specialists, many of whom do not necessarily align themselves with the TBLT project, have been quick to point out the challenges that TBLA brings for test development and validation. Nevertheless, assessment plays a decisive role in educational systems at all levels, and the teachers I have worked with wanted to see how assessing students' progress could be tied into a task-based approach. The value of Norris's article is in its attempt to offer a summary overview of how TBLA may be put into practice and the extent to which TBLA ideas have filtered through to the broader language testing domain. This helps to make discussions around TBLA more central to debates around TBLT.

Linking theory, research and practice

(6) Robinson, P. (2011). Task-based language learning: A review of issues. *Language Learning*, 61 (s1), 1–36.

The essential readings I have introduced so far have explored different aspects of practice as they relate to TBLT. This does not mean that they are not informed by either clear theorising around processes of SLA or the findings of empirical research. Those starting out on the TBLT journey need to engage with theory and research findings. This was certainly lacking in my own initial language teacher journey. However, practitioners are often busy with and focused on the day-to-day business of teaching, and do not always have sufficient time or headspace to reflect in depth on theory and research. With regard to easy access to research studies, I have found Robinson's review article to be particularly valuable. It was written as the introduction to a series of papers that appeared in a special issue of *Language Learning* focused on TBLT and is, in part, an introduction to those papers. In my estimation, its central importance lies in its attempt to bring together and articulate concisely both early and more recent propositions around TBLT's potential to promote SLA alongside ways in which these theoretical propositions have been tested through research. This article stands out as a valuable synthesis of key theory and research.

One strength of this article, from my viewpoint, lies in the breadth of studies Robinson identified and succinctly presented, leaving readers to follow these up for themselves. The article opens with a bullet-point list that immediately draws readers' attention to what tasks aim to do as part of the SLA process. It then focuses attention on a range of studies influenced by these aims, taking into account two foundational theoretical drivers for TBLT: a cognitive-interactionist perspective (informed, among other

stances, by Long's interaction hypothesis) and a sociocultural-interactionist perspective (influenced, for example, by Vygotsky's early ideas around collaborative learning and the Zone of Proximal Development). Furthermore, the article places a focus on SLA researchers' PEDAGOGICALLY-oriented concerns with how different tasks with different characteristics might impact on learning.

Another key strength of this article lies in its clear articulation of developments in thinking and theorising around SLA processes, centred around a range of important hypotheses, and what these developments mean for the TBLT endeavour. It must be acknowledged that its publication in 2011 means that a good deal of further empirical work has been carried out since that time. Nevertheless, I believe the article provides a solid and valuable overview of the state of play at the time of its publication.

(7) Bygate, M. (2020). Some directions for the possible survival of TBLT as a real world project. *Language Teaching*, 53(3), 275–288.

The findings of empirical research provide important evidence for the efficacy of tasks to enhance SLA. Nonetheless, my work with teachers has underscored the reality that, if we do not take teachers' practice-focused concerns seriously, the TBLT project is potentially 'doomed to failure' (Bygate, 2020, p. 275). Bygate's article presents a useful perspective on the interface that should ideally exist between empirical research and classroom pedagogy, thereby proposing a valuable agenda for future research. It proceeds from the principle that it is important for applied linguists to move beyond the narrow confines of the theoretically-driven research environment and to become involved with the challenges encountered by individuals working in the real world. This is arguably nowhere truer than in the domain of TBLT, which, as Long (2015, p. 343) suggested, is 'the closest thing to a researched pedagogy that exists.' On this basis, Bygate made the crucial argument that research endeavours in the TBLT space need to take account of the struggles and challenges with TBLT implementation that real practitioners are facing.

Bygate suggested that applied linguists/researchers should aim to do three things: (1) to demonstrate how tasks can work effectively for language learners at all levels of language learning and across the full range of language that learners need to encounter; (2) to move beyond the task in isolation to the range of learning processes and strategies that teachers may also utilise in classrooms; and (3) to work in collaboration with teachers so that research becomes not only more classroom-embedded but also takes into account what teachers perceive as pedagogical priorities in the TBLT space. After all, argued Bygate, TBLT is an ambitious proposal. Teachers' perspectives must inform its future.

The concerns Bygate raised do not mean that it is not important to celebrate what empirically-based TBLT research has achieved. However, as I perceive it, what makes this article essential are, first, Bygate's exploration of what he believed that applied linguistics research has thus far NOT been able to address and, second, his consideration of what might help move the TBLT research agenda forward in ways that would impact more meaningfully on classroom practice. Essentially, the significance of this article resides in Bygate's attempts to suggest how TBLT research might close the gap between theory and practice.

Teachers – the essential operational variable

(8) Van den Branden, K. (2016). The role of teachers in task-based language education. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 36, 164–181.

At its core, TBLT is, in the words of Robinson (2011, p. 4), 'a proposal for improving pedagogy.' On that basis, it makes sense that TEACHERS should be a central variable of interest and attention, and this is reflected in my own core research focus. However, a major concern that Van den Branden addressed in this important TBLT article was the scant attention that he believed had been paid to the teacher's role in mediating TBLT.

I have already indicated that one of the initial anxieties around TBLT that I encountered with the teachers I worked with was fuelled by a misperception that TBLT's essentially learner-centred and experiential approach meant that LEARNERS might end up being exclusively responsible for their own learning. By this understanding, the teacher would step back and let the learners get on with it, with the anticipated outcome that SLA would occur naturally and spontaneously – a cause for some consternation. A central concern for Van den Branden in this article was that readers of the empirical and theoretical literature may also be left with this impression. He argued that, by contrast, teachers have significant roles to play in the task-based classroom. The teacher is, critically, 'a mediator of language learning,' with a key role 'to enhance the effectiveness of task-based language teaching' (2016, p. 166). Van den Branden outlined what he saw as valuable teacher interventions at all stages of a task-based lesson. Their roles include: selecting appropriate materials; planning how to use those materials; balancing meaning-focused and form-focused work; intervening appropriately during task execution; and exploring with learners the issues that have emerged from task performance (e.g., any elements of form that may require specific explanation or practice).

With the mediating role of the teacher actually being a central element of successful TBLT, Van den Branden also highlighted the reality that attention must be paid to supporting teachers with implementing TBLT. My own experiences have made it clear that teachers can struggle with TBLT implementation for a range of reasons. This raises the important issue of teacher education and support as teachers attempt to mediate innovation. Finally, Van den Branden advocated for involving teachers in classroom-based research that may help them to try out task-based ideas for themselves and draw their own conclusions. The bottom line that, in my view, makes this an essential reading, is the assertion that 'the role of the teacher in TBLT is crucial. Teachers bring TBLT to life' (2016, p. 179).

Critiques and defences of TBLT

(9) Long, M. (2016). In defense of tasks and TBLT: Nonissues and real issues. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 36, 5–33.

My experiences of working with beginning teachers have demonstrated that, in the face of resistance to task-based ideas, it is important to confront teachers with reasoned defences of TBLT, at least as a stimulus for their own reflections, conversations and decision-making. In that light, I see Long's article as essential reading, for four equally important reasons. There is, first, Long's articulation of his own takes on task and TBLT as someone who was wholly committed to the TBLT project for many years. From this dedicated insider standpoint, he discussed what he perceived as real or imaginary challenges. Second, Long acknowledged and presented contrasting perspectives from scholars who took an early lead in the theorising about TBLT (notably Skehan and Ellis). Third, Long confronted the arguments of those who, despite varying degrees of sympathy towards the aims of TBLT, have mounted criticisms against it. Fourth, Long grounded the article's propositions in the findings of empirical research.

The majority of the article is devoted to claims that, in Long's view, could be easily dismissed. These 'non-issues' include, among other things, the acquisition of grammatical competence and the place and role of direct instruction. Put simply, Long countered the criticism that TBLT may be perceived as promoting a focus on meaning whereas students might be better served by a focus on forms (See Item 3 above for how Long previously addressed this).

In many ways, the stances taken by Long are clear and unapologetic, and demonstrate Long's well-reasoned but unequivocal take on what constitutes TBLT. There are assertions, for example, that such and such a claim is clearly erroneous. This does not mean, however, that Long was not open to the fact that questions around TBLT still remain. In the latter part of the article, the focus of attention is on claims that, from Long's perspective, are real issues with which TBLT needs to grapple. These include how to determine with a degree of certainty the complexity of a given task, the interface between teaching/learning and assessment, and the role of teacher education.

The article acts as a succinct articulation of several ideas and concepts that Long explored significantly more extensively in a book appearing around the same time (Long, 2015). The core values of this article as an essential reading are, in my view, its useful summation of key aspects of Long's extensive theorising, and its provocation to at least think about the issues confronting TBLT, whether real or illusory.

(10) Ellis, R. (2017). Position paper: Moving task-based language teaching forward. *Language Teaching*, 50(4), 507–526.

In guiding less experienced colleagues as they grapple with TBLT ideas, it is, I believe, important that they are confronted with a range of perspectives so that they can come to appreciate several sides to a given argument. For me, this makes Ellis's position paper an essential reading, not least because of ways in which it responds to Long (2016). In particular, the article confronts the view Ellis believed was being advocated by Long, that TBLT represents a 'single, monolithic approach' to language pedagogy (2017, p. 522). Ellis argued that TBLT can be more accommodating of different elements.

Ellis identified ten issues that he regarded as genuine concerns that the TBLT community and TBLT advocates need to address. The first is exactly what a task is for purposes of TBLT, once more underscoring the vital importance of helping stakeholders to develop a clear, theoretically-grounded understanding of the construct. Other thorny issues follow. The majority concern aspects of classroom practice, including task sequencing and complexity, ways in which students may be organised to undertake a task, and where and how teacher input comes in. The article also raises the role of teacher education in helping teachers to address the challenges they face when trying to implement TBLT.

In several respects, therefore, Ellis tackled issues that Long had also considered. However, Ellis concluded by focusing on one 'final "real issue"' (2017, p. 522) that he recognised as creating a distinction between himself and Long – how to incorporate an appropriate balance between task-based experiential work and targeted focus on more formal aspects of the language. This was something that Ellis maintained had so far eluded TBLT, at least in its stronger forms. Certainly, what I have experienced with beginning teachers' initial engagement with TBLT is that its 'learning by doing' emphasis has often made these teachers apprehensive owing to its apparent side-lining of more structured elements. It would be unfair to suggest that Long was not open to considering alternatives – he acknowledged, after all, that '[t]he jury is still out on optimal uses and timing of various kinds and combinations of instruction (explicit, implicit, focus on form, focus on forms, etc.)' (Long, 2015, p. 26). Nonetheless, the difference between Long and Ellis would appear to be in Long's firm belief in a particular realisation of TBLT and Ellis's greater openness to embrace traditional (i.e., teacher-fronted) elements. I believe this article deserves consideration together with Long when it comes to the core issue Ellis wished to confront – moving TBLT forward.

Book-length treatments of TBLT

(11) Ellis, R., Skehan, P., Li, S., Shintani, N., & Lambert, C. (2020). *Task-based language teaching: Theory and practice*. Cambridge University Press.

The essential readings I have proposed so far have been articles or individual book chapters that arguably provide more bite-sized and manageable access to diverse aspects of TBLT than a single book might do. In my experience, bite-sized is important owing to what I have already acknowledged as, for example, the many demands made on time-poor and practice-oriented teachers' lives. It would be remiss, however, not to consider what book-length treatments of the TBLT endeavour contribute to our understanding of TBLT. One strength of books is the opportunity to bring a host of important issues under one umbrella in a coherent and cohesive way. I could perhaps have selected Ellis (2003) as an essential reading. There is no doubt that that early volume was a critical step in solidifying TBLT as

a distinct phenomenon, as well as Ellis's significant position in the field, and I have drawn on it myself in my own work. That said, the work is a weighty tome and, at times, a challenging read, and it is not able to take into account advances in thinking and scholarship over the last 20 years. Ellis et al. (2020) represents a recent significant contribution to the field that balances substance with clear and up-to-date access to TBLT in both theory and practice.

Importantly, the significance of this book as an essential reading is that it provides the opportunity to consider the broad range of scholarship that has occurred in the TBLT space since its inception, thereby offering a thorough and well-researched overview. The link between past and present enables developments and refinements over time to be tracked, and challenges that have emerged along the way to be owned and explored. The book also speculates on the future direction of TBLT, especially in light of the challenges and critiques that have emerged since the beginning. Especially for those starting out in exploring TBLT, the book offers a comprehensive resource that will help build a deep historically-grounded understanding of TBLT and its various components. Hence, it has made it onto my Essential Bookshelf list.

(12) East, M. (2021). *Foundational principles of task-based language teaching*. Routledge.

My commentary on Skehan (1996) as my first proposed essential reading hinted at a persistent issue for TBLT that was succinctly articulated by Hall (2018, pp. 106–107): ‘. . . significant differences can be seen in the way its various proponents have conceptualized the approach.’ Certainly, my years of talking and working with my own students who were teachers attempting to put TBLT ideas into practice has brought to my attention many questions and concerns. With these in mind, and recognising that many readers appreciate texts that are easy to access, I saw a critical need for a book that explores, in a reader-friendly way, several of the essential foundations on which TBLT is being built.

This book arises from my reflections on genuine issues expressed to me by real practitioners. It has three sections, each with three chapters. I have already made the argument that stakeholders need to engage with theoretical ideas about TBLT. Part I focuses on theory. However, once a theoretical grounding has been laid, it is important for stakeholders to see how theoretical ideas may be put into practice. Part II pays attention to practice. Crucially, I believe it is important that stakeholders' experiences with TBLT should be evaluated in light of theory, addressing such issues as what worked, what did not work, why that might be, and what might be done about it. In Part III, I focus on evaluation.

Each chapter interweaves the text with questions for reflection so that readers can link what they are reading back to their own experiences as language learners and/or language teachers. Each chapter concludes with suggestions of two readings that would enable those who wish to go deeper to further explore the key ideas. Complementing Ellis et al. (2020) who provided an intentionally more in-depth and thorough analysis, the ‘back-to-basics’ nature of the book makes it a potentially easy read, but this was not intended to make it lightweight. Rather, this was a deliberate stand-out feature. Indeed, one reader (a practising teacher in New Zealand undertaking postgraduate study) recently contacted me to observe that, for her, the book represented ‘a great text and very readable, unlike some other academic texts I’ve encountered so far.’ I responded that this feedback affirmed the two attributes that I kept in mind when writing it – accessibility and readability. Furthermore, the publication has been released as Gold Open Access, meaning that there are no barriers to its availability across the world.

Final thoughts

In the opening section of this Essential Bookshelf list, I declared my primary academic interest in the practitioner perspective on TBLT. In this regard, Bygate (2020, pp. 275–276) argued that, although teachers are ‘the stakeholders on whom the future of TBLT as an educational project depends,’

TBLT is ‘yet to fulfil its promise as a free-standing approach to second language education.’ This is in part because, despite a history spanning 40 years, TBLT is in many people’s thinking ‘still a relatively recent innovation’ (Long, 2016, p. 28). It is also in part because what TBLT is has remained somewhat obscure to many teachers at the chalkface.

My own early approach to language teaching was situated in, and shaped by, a particular historical context. Dobson (2018) explained it in this way: a move towards curricular reform in the UK school system (early 1980s) and the ensuing first iteration of the UK’s National Curriculum for languages (in 1991) encouraged using language authentically and spontaneously for genuine communicative purposes. In other words, it was about ‘learners who were learning languages because they needed to USE them in an ever-shrinking world’ (Benson & Voller, 1997, p. 11). Nonetheless, the construct of task was not overtly articulated. It was down to us, as the teachers, to interpret issues such as authenticity, spontaneity and real communication in our own contexts, and we often did this intuitively and without any introduction to the task-based literature.

For me, it took exposure to another curriculum reform – this time the reform initiated in New Zealand – alongside my work as a language teacher educator, to be confronted with the phenomenon of TBLT, in both theory and practice. My preliminary response was to see TBLT as the potential solution to what I was trying to achieve as a language teacher in the 1980s and 1990s, but with limited understanding. As my initial enthusiasm for the TBLT project came up against the contextual constraints that my students forcefully brought to my attention, my understanding of TBLT and its potential became honed. In particular, I evaluated what I read about TBLT against the backdrop of practitioners’ reported experiences. This Essential Bookshelf is offered as a starting point for practitioners and researchers to develop their knowledge and awareness of the fundamental issues that inform TBLT as a real-world endeavour.

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