

学术前沿与动态

Questions and Answers on Task-Based Language Teaching*

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The questions I received cover a broad range of important issues for anyone interested in TBLT. My answers are brief and informal, but are accompanied by references to more comprehensive and detailed discussions of the issues available elsewhere.

Before beginning, it is important to clarify what I mean by ‘TBLT’. TBLT is used in its original meaning to refer to genuine *Task-Based LT* (language teaching), in which ‘task’ is the unit of analysis at every stage in the design, delivery and evaluation of a language course. *Target tasks* for students—what they need to be able to use the L2 to *do* beyond the classroom—are identified by a needs analysis. Teachers and students then work together on a series of increasingly complex *pedagogic tasks*, designed to prepare students for those

target tasks. Student achievement is assessed using task-based, criterion-referenced performance tests. TBLT was first proposed in a Georgetown Round Table conference plenary presentation in 1983, and subsequently appeared as Long (1985). It has been developed by many researchers and practitioners since then. For brief overviews, see Long (2015) and Long & Crookes (1992). The most complete exposition can be found in Long (2014), with extensive discussions of all the issues raised by the questions, and many more besides.

Task-Based LT should not be confused with *task-supported LT*. *Task-supported LT* simply means use of miscellaneous pedagogic tasks unrelated to learners’ real world needs to practice items in a synthetic

* 这是一篇书面采访。在组织此次专访之前，曾向《国际汉语教师 500 强》微信群的老师们征集了有关任务式教学的相关问题。曹贤文(南京大学)、陈默(北京语言大学)、丁安琪(华东师范大学)、梁晓萍(南开大学)、马春燕(浙江理工大学)、吴中伟(复旦大学)、Xu Shejiao(英国汉语教师)、张黎(北京语言大学)等老师就任务式教学提出了很多有价值的问题，并给予了很好很好的建议。我们对这些问题进行了整理，并与 Michael H. Long 教授进行了多次沟通。在此基础上形成了一份完整的采访提纲。此次采访活动是由马里兰大学的 Wei Yi (易维) 博士组织实施的。在此谨向给予支持的《国际汉语教师 500 强》微信群及老师们致以诚挚的谢忱！

linguistic syllabus of some kind, usually a traditional grammatical, lexical or notional-functional syllabus. *Task-supported* LT suffers, therefore, from most of the well-known problems (irrelevance to student needs, psycholinguistic implausibility, boring lessons, etc.) characteristic of skill-building approaches that employ synthetic linguistic syllabi and the Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) methodology typically employed to deliver such syllabi at the classroom level.

The responses that follow pertain to *Task-Based* LT. Due to the prominence of English in the PRC, English will be used in the examples, most of which, however, would apply to any foreign or second language.

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Part One: Tasks in TBLT

1. What is the difference between target tasks, pedagogic tasks and classroom tasks that aim to promote interaction? How do they contribute to classroom-based language teaching?

Target tasks are the things students need to *do* in and through the L2 for academic, vocational training or occupational purposes, or simply for everyday life in an L2 environment. For example, among many other things, international students planning to enroll at an overseas university need to register for courses, attend lectures and seminars in their field, and produce oral and/or written discipline- and genre-appropriate reports, e.g., of business case studies or scientific laboratory experiments. Target tasks for students undergoing vocational training, e.g., to become chefs or automobile mechanics, might include complying with rapid-fire instructions shouted at them by a master chef in a noisy kitchen, or following written instructions on how to use a computer to locate the source of an engine

problem. In an occupational purpose course, a hotel receptionist may need English to welcome arriving guests, check them in, and direct them to their rooms. For some of these students, as well as for some tourists, residence in an L2 environment overseas may involve the ability to perform everyday “social survival” tasks, such as following street directions, opening a bank account, using public transport, renting an apartment, changing an airline reservation, taking a driver’s test, visiting a doctor, or registering a child for school. In each case, these examples are just a fraction of the target tasks for such students.

Target tasks are identified through task-based needs analyses, procedures for which are well established (see Long, 2005, 2013a, b, 2014; Serafini, Lake & Long, 2015). As these examples show, they can be very different for different groups of students, which is one of several reasons why offering the same course for all students regardless of their purposes in learning the L2 is as unacceptable as it would be for physicians to prescribe the same treatment for all patients without first diagnosing the illnesses from which they were suffering.

Since learners can rarely handle *target tasks* in the L2 at the outset, they initially work on simpler versions of them in the classroom—*pedagogic tasks*. Pedagogic tasks constitute the materials for a TBLT course. They are the main source of authentic target language input. Maintaining a focus on such tasks ensures that courses remain relevant to student needs. Pedagogic tasks gradually increase in complexity until they reach the full complexity of the corresponding target tasks. Students’ language development is driven in large part by the expanding communicative demands of increasingly complex pedagogic tasks.

There is no separate category of ‘classroom tasks that aim to promote interaction’. Many pedagogic tasks are designed to do this, first, when specific target tasks require it, and second, because research motivated by the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996) has shown that interaction with native or non-native speakers is useful for learning a language inside or outside the classroom (Goo & Mackey, 2013; Mackey & Goo, 2007). However, for two short articles illustrating how tasks can be designed to promote genuinely communicative classroom interaction, even with beginners, see Long (2014).

2. Given limited time and money in language teaching, how should tasks be classified into different types? How could we select a typical task out of the many similar tasks, thus creating an economically and comprehensively balanced task syllabus?

Classification of target tasks into target task-types is currently carried out somewhat impressionistically, making task classification an area in which research is needed. In many cases, however, it is fairly obvious which tasks share enough in common to form a task-type. For example, making or changing a restaurant, airline, theater or hotel reservation is one of the target tasks. The target task-type is making or changing a reservation. Filling out an application form for a job, to open a bank account, rent an apartment, secure a loan, and obtain a driving license, or for membership in a club are target tasks. Filling out an application form is the target task-type. For additional examples and discussion, see Long (2014). Some applied linguists have proposed classifications based on abstract, subjectively judged qualities, such as ‘cognitive load’, too vague to be plausible, and others on features, such as the skills or modality involved, which, while

common and easily noted, would result in categories so broad as to include tasks manifestly different from one another. Classifications should be based as far as possible on tangible, low-inference characteristics. Then, if the classification is reasonable, it should not matter which target task(s) from a target task-type is/are selected for inclusion in the syllabus, meaning that the designers and materials writers (usually the same people) can afford to develop a series of pedagogic tasks focused on the most interesting one(s), thereby increasing student (and teacher) motivation.

3. Is there a way to predict the transferability of task-based abilities? That is, can we predict whether a student can transfer what has been learned from a task to a new task, and if so, how much?

How to predict future performance outside the L2 classroom from what is learned inside is a long-standing problem for *all* approaches to LT. For example, students’ scores on a grammar test or on a so-called proficiency scale have little or no known relationship to how students will do at an English-medium university or in their job as, e.g., an economist, a tour guide or a diplomat, beyond the fact that students with higher scores or general proficiency are more likely to do better than students with lower scores. This should come as no surprise, given the fact that tests of general grammatical knowledge or general proficiency are unrelated to the specific uses to which a student will put the L2, making predictions based on them little more than guesswork. More surprisingly and rather embarrassingly, given that “general purpose” LT (i.e., LT for no specific purpose) has been around for centuries, shamefully little empirical research has been conducted on the matter. The technical sophistication of much modern language testing is admirable, but

the few studies that have been undertaken to date have found little or no connection—even between students' scores on some well-known standardized tests of English and students' subsequent performance at English-medium universities.

Predicting future task performance from students' current performance on the same or related tasks obviously has a greater likelihood of success, but demonstrating that is not always straightforward, and predicting performance on a future task from current performance on a *different* task is obviously likely to be harder. The transferability of task-based abilities is an important issue in TBLT. Research to date is scarce, but for a promising example, see Benson (2016).

4. Based on current TBLT research, how can we operationalize task complexity and difficulty and apply them in task sequencing?

Dozens of studies have been conducted on these issues, but results are mixed. Complexity refers to inherent qualities of a task, ranging from relatively low inference to more subjective dimensions. Common criteria for measuring complexity, with examples in parentheses, include lower inference criteria, such as the number of elements a task contains (providing an eye-witness account of a traffic accident involving three vehicles and drivers, versus two), the salience of differences among those elements (a car, a truck and a bus, versus a car and a bicycle; or two black cars versus a black car and a white one), the number of options or choices involved (making a travel reservation requiring optimal selections among one or more of possible airlines, itineraries, dates, prices, seating, etc.), the number of steps involved (reporting a complex scientific experiment), to the popular, but higher inference, reasoning demands required (planning

a rescue of people from a burning building, with potential outcomes dependent on wind direction, the location of victims on different floors, the time and rescue equipment available, etc.).

Whereas complexity refers to inherent, immutable properties of a task, task *difficulty* refers to the challenge a task poses for particular learners. For example, the same task will usually be more or less difficult for learners with or without background content knowledge or of lower or higher L2 proficiency. The complexity of individual pedagogic tasks is part of what defines them and cannot be altered, although additional more or less complex versions of the same tasks can be created. Conversely, the difficulty of individual tasks can be manipulated, e.g., by altering the *conditions* (speeded, unspeeded, more or less planning time, etc.) under which the same pedagogic tasks are carried out in the classroom. For further discussion and empirical studies of task complexity, difficulty and sequencing, see Long (2014); Révész, Michel & Gilabert (2015); Robinson (2011); and Skehan (2014).

5. How should a task syllabus be built? What kind of factors should be considered when working on a task syllabus?

Syllabus content should be determined by the results of the learner needs analysis. Typically, more target tasks are identified than there is time to include in a course, so priority is usually given to tasks identified as more critically important and/or more frequent. Pedagogic tasks are then sequenced according to task complexity. The same criteria apply when it comes time for assessment. For an extensive analysis and comparison of nine syllabus types, followed by a detailed description, with examples, of the steps in designing a

task syllabus, see Robinson (2009) and Long (2014).

Part two: TBLT and Second Language Pedagogy

6. How is TBLT different from other interactive teaching approaches?

The first important difference is that TBLT begins with a needs analysis, thereby increasing a course's relevance for students. Second, syllabus content consists of tasks, with lessons built around pedagogic tasks, not linguistic items. Third, pronunciation, grammar, lexis, collocations and pragmatics are mostly learned incidentally, in context, as learners work on the tasks. When necessary, however, teachers (as well as textbooks and other students) draw learners' attention to language more or less overtly, depending on such factors as form, form-meaning or form-function relationships' perceptual saliency and importance for completing a task. Fourth, the way face-to-face classroom (or computer-delivered) TBLT is delivered varies, and should vary, systematically according to such matters as students' age, L1 and L2 literacy, L2 proficiency, language aptitudes, and goals, and such features of the local instructional setting as class size and the forms of technology available. The teacher uses his or her expertise and unique knowledge of local circumstances to make decisions about optimal *pedagogic procedures* (PPs), but does so consistent with a set of ten *methodological principles* (MPs), each motivated (some better than others) by theory and research in cognitive SLA and the philosophy of education. There is an extensive literature on the MPs, and dozens of empirical studies (complete with statistical meta-analyses) of work on several of them. Definitions and reviews of the empirical studies are available (Doughty & Long, 2003; Long, 2009, 2014),

together with rationales from the philosophy of education (Long, 2014).

There are currently ten MPs:

MP1: Use task, not text, as the unit of analysis

MP2: Promote learning by doing

MP3: Elaborate input

MP4: Provide rich input

MP5: Encourage inductive "chunk" learning

MP6: Focus on form

MP7: Provide negative feedback

MP8: Respect learner syllabi and developmental processes

MP9: Promote cooperative collaborative learning

MP10: Individualize instruction

Each MP can be realized by many different PPs at the classroom level. For instance, a teacher might choose a more explicit form of negative feedback, e.g., a prompt or repetition with stress, for problems with perceptually less salient L2 errors, such as overuse of the unmarked negative prefix *-un* (*unhuman, *uncomplete, etc.), but a more implicit form, e.g., a recast or a clarification request, for a perceptually more salient linguistic target, such as adverb placement (*He drinks every morning three cups of coffee). A statistical meta-analysis by Li (2010) found that implicit negative feedback produces more durable language gains. The goal is always to use the least intrusive intervention that works, so that the lesson focus remains as much as possible on task completion.

The fifth major difference is the way student achievement is assessed, i.e., using task-based, criterion-referenced performance tests. Can the students follow street directions successfully, as shown by their arrival at the

correct destination (in real life or using a simulation, depending on location), or can't they? Can they extract the relevant information (identified by a subject expert) from a videoed physics or political science lecture, or can't they? And so on. Of course, there is nothing to prevent TBLT students also taking a traditional discrete-point grammar test, if so desired. Research shows they generally do as well on such measures as students taught via skill-building, PPP and other "interactive" teaching approaches (see, e.g., Gonzalez-Lloret & Nielson, 2015; Long, 2014; Shintani, 2011, 2013). The final difference is that in every evaluation to date that has looked at the issue, teachers and students report enjoying TBLT far more than traditional grammar-based approaches. If students enjoy their classes, they are more likely to attend to the input, and attention is a causal variable in language learning.

7. How is TBLT different from the teaching of foreign languages for specific purposes? How could TBLT be applied to language teaching for general purposes?

Teachers of languages for specific purposes (LSP) recognized the need for LT to be relevant to students' needs decades ago. However, there are at least two important differences between traditional LSP and TBLT. (1) The main focus in TBLT is the tasks that, e.g., economics, students need to master, not a list of grammatical structures and lexical items found in an economics textbook or lecture. (2) A TBLT course in any field is *task*-based. Most LSP courses are *text*-based, differing from conventional grammar-focused materials mainly in that their content is related to the discipline concerned (but distressingly often, suitable only for the lay-person, not field insiders). (3) Learning in TBLT is primarily assessed using tests of students' ability to do the target tasks they need to be able to

perform satisfactorily in the real world.

Applying TBLT to general purpose courses is to lose some of TBLT's most valuable qualities, and assumes that students lumped together in so-called 'general purpose' (no specific purpose?) courses do not have specific uses of the language in mind—something easily revealed by even the simplest form of needs analysis. What certainly can be applied, however, is most of TBLT's ten MPs.

8. Is TBLT suitable for students of all second language proficiency levels?

Yes. It is suitable, and used, at all proficiency levels, from courses for complete beginners to those for very advanced learners. Genuine communicative L2 use is perfectly feasible within 15 minutes of students' very first lesson. Two detailed examples of pedagogic tasks, and how to use them, for each of four proficiency levels, from elementary to advanced, can be found in Long (2014). For examples at the beginners' level, see, also, Long (2014).

9. TBLT is carried out based on task syllabi instead of structural syllabi, so how can one ensure students complete a task using appropriate target language structures and vocabulary? How does one deal with the situation when students complete the task without using certain key language points?

If students complete a well-designed pedagogic task satisfactorily, they are clearly on the way to developing the appropriate target language structures and vocabulary to do so. However, it is sometimes possible for them to complete a task without some of the desirable language. The usual solutions are to have them listen to (or read) better performances of the same task before repeating it themselves, and then to

continue with more complex pedagogic tasks in the series. A significant advantage of genuine TBLT is that appropriate structures, vocabulary and collocations are retained in the input provided by pedagogic tasks (positive evidence), since that input is *elaborated* to achieve comprehensibility, not *simplified*, as in traditional grammar-based course books, with the loss of genuine usage that is entailed. For examples, see Bartlett (2005) and O'Connell (2015). For empirical studies and a review of empirical findings on the different types of input, see Long (2014); Oh (2001); Yano, Long & Ross (1994). Finally, if needed, teachers can use some of the many pedagogic procedures available for providing focus on form and negative feedback (two of the MPs) to deal with any remaining problems. For additional discussion, see Long (2016).

10. How should students be assessed in a TBLT program? How much should grammatical and lexical knowledge and pronunciation be weighted?

Students should be assessed, first and foremost, by their ability to perform the target tasks previously identified by the needs analysis as the ones they must handle successfully outside the classroom. In some cases, especially in an L2 environment, the tasks can and should be genuine examples wherever possible. In foreign language situations, such as English in the PRC, it will often be necessary to use simulations of various kinds, e.g., videotapes of real university lectures to test students' ability to learn the subject matter information identified by the lecturer (the content specialist, not the language teacher) as important and that which would be expected of a good native speaker of English enrolled in the same course. EAP (English for academic purposes) students, for example, might need to demonstrate their ability to score 80% or higher on

a multiple-choice test of the ideas and information in a business lecture. Sometimes, a student able to complete a target task successfully will score lower on a discrete-point grammar test than a student unable to complete the same target task, although the two abilities are generally positively correlated. This reflects the well-known distinction between grammatical accuracy and communicative effectiveness. Task-based abilities are the priority in real life, and for that reason, should be during assessment of student achievement, too. For overviews of task-based assessment, see Long (2014); Norris (2009); Van Gorp & Deygers (2013). The issue of whether it is ever useful to add a linguistic caboose to a task-based assessment, and if so, how, is complicated. For discussion, see Long (2014).

11. How should teachers be evaluated in a TBLT program? How should standards for teacher training and evaluation be made?

The content of training for TBLT will need to be rather different from that for traditional LT. For example, it should include a basic understanding of what SLA research has shown about language-learning processes—incidental and intentional, implicit and explicit. It should cover what is known from empirical research about how to create optimal conditions for language learning inside and outside classrooms, e.g., the advantages and disadvantages of genuine, simplified, elaborated, and modified elaborated input. It should deal with research findings underlying the MPs, and on PPs, such as the effectiveness of different kinds of negative feedback. More generally, it should focus on what is known about how students learn languages, as opposed to skills, and about the serious problems with traditional grammar-based PPP instruction. It should explain many advantages of

TBLT, but also point out the limits on what is known, and where theory is needed to fill in the gaps. Teachers should be evaluated in the same ways as for any other field of education. Valuable resources on teacher training for TBLT include East (2012) and Van den Branden (2006, 2009, 2016).

12. TBLT is economical because it targets learners' needs. However, given the reality that language classrooms are often seated with students of various backgrounds and needs, how can one apply TBLT to this situation?

The situation described occurs in many countries and many educational systems. It is a problem for educational administrators to solve, not TBLT. Meanwhile, needs analyses often uncover at least some tasks of use and interest to the majority of students in such classes, even when their long-term uses for the L2 are very different. For an illustration with a “general purpose” Korean as a foreign language program at the University of Hawai'i, see Chaudron et al (2005). Also, some differences in target tasks can be captured at the level of target task-types (for an example, see Long, 1985).

13. How is interaction integrated in a TBLT classroom? How can one ensure that higher-ability students also benefit from collaborating with those of lower ability?

See the answer to question #6. Interaction of various kinds is an integral part of many, but by no means all, pedagogic tasks. Note, however, that while task-based interaction can generally be useful for language learning, not all students (in the PRC or anywhere else) require listening and speaking skills in the L2; for example, some may only need to be able to read professional literature in English in their field. Research

findings on mixed-proficiency pairs of small groups of students working together show that lower and higher proficiency students both benefit (see, e.g., Eckerth, 2008; Kim & McDonough, 2008; Long & Porter, 1985; Yule & Macdonald, 1990; Watanabe & Swain, 2007).

Part Three: TBLT in China

14. How could TBLT be practiced in other countries like China, where language is more likely to be viewed and taught as knowledge, and where test scores and rote learning are more favored?

Languages are still taught “as knowledge” in many countries around the world, including English-speaking countries, and so-called English exams for university entrance in some countries in East Asia are more like IQ tests than tests of real language abilities. However, largely because globalization has made individual learners, families and governments increasingly appreciate the need for *functional* abilities in foreign languages, the situation is gradually changing. Some countries have lowered the starting age for foreign languages in schools, and some, e.g., Japan, are currently in the process of changing the emphases in their college entry examinations to reflect the greater importance now attached to listening and speaking abilities and to communicative abilities. These changes will have a washback effect on the way languages are taught.

Rote learning is a tradition in many parts of the world—a learned behavior, not something innate or immutable (or it would be universal)—so it can be changed, and changed quite quickly, experience shows. East Asian students learning languages (and other subjects) in the West quickly adapt to alternative approaches, and TBLT has proved popular with

students whenever attitudes have been evaluated. As an experienced classroom teacher myself, I have always found adults, especially, to respond very positively to courses whose relevance to their needs is immediately obvious to them, especially when they have often failed to succeed in traditional grammar-based courses on two or three previous occasions. It is also worth noting that the few studies I am aware of that have tested both communicative and “grammatical” L2 abilities have generally found that students taught in a traditional course do as well, but rarely better than, graduates of a TBLT course on grammar-focused post-tests, and are outperformed by the TBLT students on communicative measures. For a review of findings, see Long (2014). However, there have been very few studies of this kind so far, mostly because TBLT is relatively new. It is another area in need of research.

15. In terms of future research, how could Chinese scholars contribute to TBLT? How could they be part of the TBLT research network?

As several commentators have noted, despite its relatively recent appearance, the research basis for TBLT is extensive and already far greater than that for every other approach to LT combined. Research contributions by Chinese scholars would be a very welcome addition. One obvious advantage they will have is that classes in the PRC tend to be relatively large and relatively homogeneous. Key issues in TBLT on which more research is needed include the generalizability of task-based abilities (see question #3), and the relative effectiveness of language-focused and task-focused courses on language-focused and task-based achievement tests (see question #14). As more of their empirical studies are presented at international conferences and published in major international

journals, Chinese scholars will quickly find themselves part of TBLT research networks. Whenever possible, they should try to attend the bi-annual International Conference on TBLT. Previous meetings have been held at Leuven (2005), Honolulu (2007), Lancaster (2009), Auckland (2011), Banff (2013), and Leuven (2015). The seventh meeting will be hosted by the University of Barcelona from April 19-21, 2017. The annual SLRF and EUROSLA Conferences also both usually feature a number of empirical studies about tasks and TBLT. Finally, there is an international membership organization for researchers and classroom teachers (not mutually exclusive groups) interested in TBLT. Membership details are posted on the TBLT 2017 Conference web-site, and available by email from info@tblt.org.

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