



# Task-based language teaching in Confucian-heritage settings: prospects and challenges

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## Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) falls within the general umbrella of communicative approaches, and can be seen as a methodological realization of the ideas behind CLT (Communicative Language Teaching). Like many innovations, TBLT is of Anglo-American origin. Its suitability for societies influenced by the tenets of Confucianism is sometimes questioned in view of the different teacher and student roles in TBLT, as opposed to those roles in conventional teaching approaches. My position is that TBLT and CLT can work well in Confucian-influenced societies but that there needs to be some adaptations based on the needs of the host context. This can be facilitated by the fact that there are many variations and choices for teachers to select from when they are carrying out TBLT. This is both part of the beauty of TBLT and part of its complexity.

The aim of this short article is to suggest some key areas in which adaptations to TBLT can occur with the hope that practitioners in Japan (and elsewhere) can use these ideas to make their own adaptations which suit their beliefs and the needs of their students. I discuss three focal areas in which these adaptations may occur: the teaching of grammar; the role of assessment; and achieving a balance between oral tasks and those developing other language skills. Although my research on TBLT has been mainly focused on elementary schools (Carless, 2002, 2004) or high schools (Carless, 2007a), I believe these aspects also carry implications for other sectors, such as universities or private language institutions.

## Grammar in TBLT

One of the rationales for the introduction of TBLT in the 1980s was to build a stronger link between methodology and SLA theory (see, for example, Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998). A key insight from an early pioneer of TBLT, the Indian scholar Prabhu, was that form is best acquired when the focus is on meaning. For many teachers, this may seem somewhat paradoxical but this is basically similar to how children of all nationalities learn their mother tongue: they are exposed to language, try to communicate and gradually acquire

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correct grammar. For example, to exhort an English-speaking toddler to add an -s to the third person singular of the simple present tense might seem somewhat absurd, but this sometimes does occur in EFL classrooms around the world.

In an influential variation of TBLT put forward by Jane Willis (e.g. Willis, 1996), students are required to complete a task with their pre-existing language resources. The language focus (i.e. the grammar) comes in the post-task stage. Language focus and language practice are recommended in the post-task phase as “an opportunity for explicit language instruction” (Willis, 1996, p. 101). Such TBLT strategies are likely to be suitable for those adult learners who already have substantial linguistic resources and need mainly to activate this language, but their feasibility with less proficient learners is largely unproven. A further challenge for the teacher in the Willis model is that they need the skill and flexibility to be able to organize the language focus on the basis of what has occurred in the task. This may be difficult for all but the most resourceful of teachers. It also appears somewhat paradoxical to many practitioners because it is a very different sequence to more conventional Presentation-Practice-Production (P-P-P) approaches.

P-P-P has a logic that is appealing to teachers and learners: it allows the teacher to control the content and pace of the lesson (Thornbury, 1999); and it provides a clear teacher role, so is in accordance with power relations often found in classrooms (Skehan, 2003). The approach of one chunk of grammar at a time also permits straightforward integration with published materials which is convenient for teachers in textbook-driven systems. As Peter Skehan likes to say, the main problem with P-P-P is that it does not work (see, for example, the evidence in Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1996 etc.), except with a small minority of motivated, diligent and grammar-loving students. The relative merits of TBLT and P-P-P are discussed in more detail in Carless (2009).

Another variation for learning grammar within TBLT involves focused tasks which target the use of a particular pre-determined linguistic feature whilst still maintaining a concern for message communication and student choice of linguistic resources (Ellis, 2003). Focused tasks have two objectives: 1) to stimulate communicative language use and 2) to target the use of a particular predetermined target feature (Ellis, 2003). The focused task is one way of bridging the gap between TBLT and a desire of teachers to present specific grammatical items (Carless, 2009). So, for example, students could be involved in a picture description task in which they need to use prepositions, such as ‘behind’, ‘in front of’, or ‘next to’ to describe the position of certain objects. The main focus of the task could be on the correct use of prepositions.

A further promising grammatical variation is consciousness-raising (CR) tasks in which teachers try to involve students actively in working out grammatical rules by noticing salient features of examples. Ellis (1997) defines a CR task as an activity in which learners are provided language data and carry out some analysis of it for the purpose of arriving at an explicit understanding of some properties of the target language. Such an approach does not preclude teacher input and explanation, but this usually comes after students have carried out some language analysis. This underpins the need for a variety of approaches to grammar instruction with CR tasks representing an option rather than a replacement for more deductive approaches (Mohamed, 2004). Chan (2008) presents a practical example of combining inductive and deductive approaches to teach conditional sentences to Hong Kong high school learners. The teacher provided students with an authentic text which included some examples of conditional sentences. As a preliminary, students read the text and carried out some meaning-based activities. The CR part began with students underlining those sentences in which the second conditional featured. Then students tried to answer the following questions in pairs or small groups:

1. How many actions are there in the sentences with the word 'if'?
2. What is the relationship between the actions?
3. Are the actions immediately after the 'if' possible or impossible?
4. Are the sentences describing true or imagined situations?
5. Are they past, present or future actions?

Based on their responses to these questions, students were then invited to form a rule about type two conditionals by choosing one or more of the options in the following sentence:

Conditional Type Two is used to show actions that are possible/ impossible to happen and their reasons/ consequences. It refers to past/ present/ future actions.

With some support from the teacher and their peers, students might be able to work out that the 'if' clause denotes imagined future situations that may be possible, unlikely or impossible and the other clause indicates their imaginary consequences (see also Carless, 2007b; Chan, 2008).

Consciousness-raising tasks are well worth exploring further and adding to one's repertoire of approaches to teaching grammar.

## Assessment and TBLT

We know that in formal educational situations where certification is at stake, assessment is what most powerfully captures the minds of students. This is largely the case everywhere, but particularly so in Confucian-heritage settings (Carless, 2011) given the long history of examinations in China, dating back to the Han dynasty. A major barrier to TBLT is that in Asian settings, it often does not cohere with the needs of conventional high-stakes examinations (Littlewood, 2007). If tasks are not relevant to the needs of important assessments, they may be disregarded by students and teachers. An important finding

from Deng and Carless (2010) was the impact of teacher beliefs and values on mediating between TBLT and the needs of examinations. In detailed case studies of four teachers, three were discouraged from carrying out tasks because they felt examination preparation was more important, whereas the fourth teacher perceived that tasks would help her students learn best, and that this would adequately prepare them for any test which they took (Deng & Carless, 2010).

To stimulate the implementation of CLT and TBLT, high-stakes school examinations in Hong Kong have over the last twenty years increased the weighting awarded to oral performance, and the examinations have become increasingly task-based. A recent high-profile innovation is the introduction of school-based assessment (SBA) by which students carry out oral tasks within the school which are graded by the teacher and count towards the high-stakes examination at the end of high school (Davison, 2007; Davison & Hamp-Lyons, 2010). The results of these assessments count for 15% of the English language subject grade in the public examination.

These oral tasks are either group discussions or oral presentations, in both cases responses to a print or non-print 'text', such as a book or movie. For example, students might be asked to choose a present for the main character in the movie *Forrest Gump* and explain why they think that present is suitable. Gan, Davison and Hamp-Lyons (2009) explored the discourse generated by this task and found that peer group discussion as an oral assessment format has the potential to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate 'real-life' spoken interactional abilities.

This SBA innovation is an explicit attempt to integrate TBLT with the needs of high stakes assessment. It seems to have a positive impact on students in that they engage with English more actively, for example, through extensive reading or viewing and then oral presentations. The main challenges are in relation to teacher workload: SBA training,

moderation meetings, recording and storing samples, as well as the pedagogical emphases of preparing students and giving them feedback. SBA provides an example of how tasks can be integrated with the needs of assessment which is an important factor encouraging their acceptance by teachers and students. It is an important and much-discussed issue in relation to the interface between assessment and TBLT in contemporary Hong Kong.

### **Finding a balance between oral and other modes of task**

A stereotype of CLT and TBLT is an oral pair or group work task or discussion. This stereotype has perhaps been encouraged by the fact that task-based research has predominantly focused on oral production which may have contributed to teachers' perceptions of the primacy of oral tasks (Carless, 2007a). Whilst oral work is an important component of task-based approaches, care needs to be taken to achieve a balance in the development of different skills. For example, group work may not always function smoothly in settings (such as Japan) where students share the same mother tongue and so the temptation to fall back on Japanese may be hard to resist.

In Confucian-heritage settings, students are sometimes more comfortable with reading and writing tasks than those which require oral communication. Reticence and fear of making mistakes or losing face can impede Asian students from full participation in oral activities. Following from the discussion in the previous section on assessment, it is also worth noting that high-stakes examinations tend to privilege reading, writing and grammatical accuracy over oral production and fluency. This may make reading and writing tasks particularly relevant to students.

My proposed situated task-based approach (Carless, 2007a) suggests a need for a varied repertoire of activities, including greater attention to individual tasks. A useful strategy might be to focus more on reading and writing tasks to cohere better with examinations and contribute to a clarification of the perception

that task-based approaches overemphasize speaking. Whilst the task-based literature does include discussion of other modes, for example, narrative writing (Ellis & Yuan, 2004) or extensive reading (Green, 2005), more analyses still need undertaking. Jigsaw reading, for example, is a particularly useful activity in which students can read paired texts individually and then share information with a partner about what they have read.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper supports the notion that we need context-sensitive teaching methods (Bax, 2004) or what I call a situated task-based approach in which culture, setting and teachers' existing beliefs and practices interact with the principles of TBLT (Carless, 2007a). Task-based approaches can be more effective in diverse contexts if, for example, grammar options are strengthened and better understood; synergy between TBLT and the requirements of assessment and examinations is enhanced; and an appropriate balance can be found between oral and other task modes.

In terms of future work and an emerging research agenda on TBLT in EFL contexts, I have proposed in Carless (2013, forthcoming) the following:

- more reports from different EFL settings on progress in implementing TBLT;
- detailed qualitative accounts of what is really taking place in classrooms in which the teacher is trying to implement some version of TBLT;
- further consideration of contextual adaptations to TBLT to verify or add to what I have proposed in this article;
- continued scrutiny of the interface between assessment and TBLT; and
- searches for appropriate forms of teacher education and support for the implementation of TBLT.

Much has been achieved in relation to TBLT, and as ever there is still scope for further investigation.

## About the author

David Carless is Associate Professor and Head of the Division of English Language Education, Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong. He has worked in Hong Kong for the past 25 years and has taught in schools, language centers and in teacher education. His main current research interest is in how assessment can be reconfigured to stimulate productive student learning. His latest book is entitled: *From testing to productive student learning: implementing formative assessment in Confucian-heritage settings* published by Routledge in 2011.

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