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“Revisiting the TBLT model: Theoretical, critical and practical connotations”

Abstract

The present article focuses on the exploration of the theoretical facets of TBLT vis-à-vis the very concept of task, as well as its underpinning phases, traits and principles. It does further elaborate on the benefits and drawbacks emanating from its actual implementation through pinpointing its feasibility and functionality highlighting the stance and role of educators.

Key words: task, pedagogical schemata, teacher cognition, joint research model.

Introduction

During the last decades the learning community has evinced an insatiable need for novel learning approaches moving away from the audio-lingual practices towards an immensely communicative orientation. Task-Based Learning/Teaching (TBLT) is an evidence of this need emerging as a ubiquitous term in the EFL literature. An overview of this learning pedagogy with a close reference to the analysis of the relevant theoretical and social framework is considered important. The theoretical and practical implications open the path for a novel perception of the TBLT model by taking into close consideration explicit and implicit parameters.

Theoretical orientation and methodology

There is a plethora of views on the TBLT methodology being split into two main approaches. According to the first one TBLT is nothing, but an offshoot of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) implying that the first is an extension of the latter, and a lot of overlapping occurs (Nunan, 2006). This transcendence from CLT to

TBLT is conceptualised as a move from **awakening** to **awareness** (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Yet, there are some dissenting voices embracing the use of **COLT** (**C**ommunication **O**riented **L**anguage **T**eaching) as an umbrella term for both CLT and TBL (Littlewood, 2004). In this way the second approach puts forward the concept of integrative, rather than extensive character of TBLT.

The TBLT model draws on values of versatile methodologies blurring in a way their boundaries. It resorts to a **cognitive** approach placing emphasis on fluency and accuracy by simultaneously integrating a **social interactive** approach (i.e negotiation of meaning via interactive patterns) (Skehan, 2003). It is as well imbued with a **humanistic theory** of learning by positing the learner at the very centre of the learning process.

Context and field of operation

It is striking however, that the TBLT method aims to introduce the concept of **context** much more dynamically than the CLT (Ellis, 2003). The task-based teaching is an Anglo-American creation, so it is to be expanded even in non-western contexts considering any specific socio-cultural, political and historical parameters measuring whether the language practices it offers are transformative (i.e enable learners to achieve control over their lives) (Ellis, 2003). This is to be mainly attained through the use of tasks as “a feature of everyday life in the personal, public, educational or occupational domains” (CEFR, 2001:157).

Being considered a post-modern educational concept, TBLT stems from the actual implementation of a task-based syllabus and is opposed to the PPP model of language teaching, which seems to be the weak form of CLT where exercises loom large as a

form of learning (Frost, 2004). TBLT on the other hand, perceives learning as a developmental process where errors are tackled as conducive to learning new rules and interlanguage is promoted through mediation tasks, by thus reflecting the strong side of the CLT (Ellis, 2006).

Task modelling and interaction types

The crux of the TBLT model is that of *task*. A consensus definition of *task* continues to elude the TBLT literature, except for that of Ellis (2003:16) which synthesises disparate definitions to derive a composite one:

A task is a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their linguistic resources.

The purpose of tasks is to expose learners to the spoken and written genres of English, whereas the schematic formula (i.e pre-Task/Task Cycle/ Language Focus) reflects the chronology of a task-based learning, to which task modelling is amenable, as they explore meaning and form, which constitute the gist of learning.

A variety of tasks such as **creative** (i.e painting, story writing), **problem solving** (i.e jigsaw, crossword), and **routine transactions** (i.e opinion gap, or opinion exchange)

seems to be an inherent aspect of TBLT (CEFR, 2001). But, a task is never to be grasped as a monolithic entity, for it may involve “embedded sub-tasks” integrating thus multiple skills and subskills (CEFR, 2001:157). These tasks can be elucidated according to some factors, such as the **input genre** (e.g diary, recipe, lecture, etc) and **modality** (e.g written, spoken, graphic/pictorial) which do always interact (Oxford, 2006). Another emergent task factor is **linguistic complexity**, which alludes to any amount of redundancy, discourse style, concreteness, or abstractness of the language used (Skehan, 2003). Moreover, **cognitive load** (i.e people’s capacity to process information) along with **cognitive complexity** (i.e intricate perceptions) which is both task and person dependent highlight the cognitive processing exacted (Oxford, 2006).

The TBLT model aspiring to bring about radical changes exerts an impact even on the interaction patterns and the roles teachers and learners are correspondingly ascribed to, as juxtaposed to the traditional form-focused pedagogy (Ellis, 2006). More specifically, “task-based interaction” exhibits the subsequent focal features, such as **minimalisation**, **indexicality** and **modified interaction** (Seedhouse, 1999). *Minimalisation* pertains to the use of loose discourse structures, by thus using the very rudiments of language (Ellis, 2006). In a similar vein, *indexicality* involves a type of interaction, which is context-driven and lucid solely to those coming to grips with the task, whilst *modified interaction* divulges versatile communication strategies, such as clarifications, confirmation checks, etc (Seedhouse,1999).

Last, but not least, the role of learners as that of a task-analyzer exploiting their reservoir of learning styles and reverting to any indispensable strategies, render them

risk-takers, innovators, goal-setters and self-evaluators (Oxford, 2006). On the other hand, teachers' presence is predominantly tacit, but creatively facilitative.

Critical analysis of the TBLT model

The TBLT model exhibits both beneficial and restrictive characteristics for the learning process. The beneficial aspect lies in that TBLT, as a flexible curriculum tool, does not impose a linear syllabus for teachers to follow resting on the premise that learning is:

•*Experiential and process- oriented*

The extensive language exposure and use, resonates vivid interactive learning, subsumed to a trajectory of meaning-focused to form-focused communication (Willis, 2008). Learning is thus authentic and natural, but at the same time incremental by promoting collaboration, critical thinking, negotiation of meaning and autonomy via real-life tasks (Ellis, 2003). The product is synthetic and eclectic learning.

•*Decentralised, multididciplinary and holistic*

Tasks are extended into projects, taking thus into close consideration diverse learning styles, learning needs and language beliefs conducive to meaningful language education (Willis and Willis, 2007). Moreover, learning is holistic both at a narrow level, (evident in student –led outcomes in form of written reports, spoken presentations) and at a broad one conceptualising teachers and learners as “whole people” for whom language use is inseparable from their whole personal and cultural identity (Willis and Willis, 2007). This humanistic facet of learning is really crucial for integral learning personalities.

On the other hand, it must be stressed that despite any positive aspects, TBLT is not impervious to criticism. There are some areas where some problems are pinpointed as follows:

•Learners' readiness

Learners find it difficult to cope efficiently with the diverse phases of task completion, due to their young age, or inadequate socio-linguistic repertoire (Skehan, 2003). The linguistic complexity and cognitive demand may as a consequence blur the effective perception (ibid).

•Pre-eminence of meaning at the expense of form

The form is explored towards the end of the task during the language analysis phase, entailing any risks of displaying minimal and truncated language output (Carless, 2003). The learner factor and TBLT morphology seem at this point to be a deterrent to natural learning flow, but the deficiencies of TBLT are not treated passively. Ellis (2006) comes up with pioneering ideas, so as to strike a balance between meaning and form by artfully implementing implicit (i.e clarifications, recasts) and explicit techniques on form use (i.e metalingual questions, queries, etc).

Overview of parameters in implementing the TBLT approach

Teachers' understanding and beliefs

It goes without saying that teachers constitute the *sine qua non* figures of any implementation (Carless, 2003). Their perceptions and beliefs, or otherwise *teacher cognition* constitute the focal point for further change (Borg, 2006). For this to happen, a lucid perception of the TBLT model is exacted, for as it has been observed, many teachers hold vague conceptions on the functionality and viability of the TBLT model, or

are misinformed judging it based on misconceptions stemming from negative perceptions (Karavas-Doukas, 1995). Moreover, an involvement of both *pre-service* and *in service* teachers in the mastery of the principles of TBLT is considered crucial, because qualified educators are the best conduit of any form of pedagogical innovation. Once grasping the tangible aspects of the TBLT model, teachers' beliefs and stances map out the nature of implementation. As a result, teacher training should be ongoing and developmental, tending to motivate and tailor innovations to teachers' knowledge and experience granting them an inclusive identity (Borg, 2006; Farrell, 2012).

Teachers' training and expertise

This being the case, teacher training is a pivotal parameter in moulding any teachers' attitudes. Carless (2003) accentuates the need for a contemporaneous *on-site training* (i.e within the educational context) and *off-site training* (i.e a spherical training outside the school context). East (2012) on the other hand puts forward the findings of some researches that highlight that no form of training can alter teachers' perceptions, which are impacted by their previous experiences as language learners. This kind of incompatibility between teacher cognition and the principles of the TBLT innovation insinuates that prior pedagogical schemata constitute a barrier to innovative pedagogical schemata. Consequently, teacher training should precede before any type of learning innovations starting ideally with a rigorous and expansive pre-service training that takes into close consideration even teachers' ingrained perceptions of learning as language learners (ibid). The bipolarity between teachers' increase of awareness and a difficulty of implementation permeates a lot of educational settings (i.e Portugal, Italy, Spain, Hungary, Greece, Turkey, etc). These countries after being initiated into TBLT

training through ICT in the collaborative European project ETALAGE, as reported by Weijdemans-Pieterse (2012) find it hard sometimes to reconcile this kind of bipolarity indicating that traditional learning methods, or idiosyncratic local traits may impede the embracement of innovations, which may be considered as intrusive to local practices.

Moreover, another dimension should be given due weight, as it has been demonstrated that even in contexts (e.g England) where TBLT principles seem to be implemented to a considerable degree, they do not stem from the knowledge of the TBLT pedagogy, but from a personal teacher's approach, (Andon, 2009). This calls for a *joint research model* among researchers, so as to better frame the TBLT profile and its implementation (my italics) delving into the conscious and unconscious use of pedagogical formulas. The theoretical reservoir of TBLT should not therefore remain a form of pedagogic bulk, but be utilised creatively and further integrated into *teachers' cognition*.

Consequently, innovations should create a sense of ownership to the implementers (i.e teachers) who must by all means take part in the decision-making processes (Watson Todd, 2006). The TBLT model as a post-modern practice, should aim to create the optimum options for language learning by approaching it holistically and be implemented in contexts where sociolinguistic, cultural and individual parameters are ripe. (Watson Todd, 2006).

Conclusion

Deductively, this article aimed to focus its attention on the theoretical aspects of TBLT model by scrutinising versatile aspects of its pedagogical status demonstrating that an innovation in order to be effective should be inclusive by being based on a well

grounded methodology and follow a context-oriented policy. Conversely, a static implementation of TBLT without encapsulating all its dynamic features emerges as arid and intrusive. Moreover, the role of educators in decision-making processes should be active, so as to avoid perceptual bipolarity and confusion. The imposition of innovations without a prior fertile terrain may lead to resistance, whilst a gradual, effective embracement will conduce to learning success.

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