Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

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Mike Long is a Professor of SLA at the University of Maryland, College Park, where he teaches courses and seminars in the Ph.D. Program in SLA. Mike serves or has served on the Editorial Boards of Studies in Second Language Acquisition, TESOL Quarterly, Language Teaching Research, JACET Bulletin, Porta Linguarium, Estudios de Linguistica Aplicada, Revista Nebrija de Linguistics y Bilingualismo, and Linguistics and Bilingualism, and was co-editor of the Cambridge Applied Linguistics Series for its first 20 years. With Kira Gor and Scott Jackson, he recently completed a four-year, federally-funded project, “Linguistic Correlates of Proficiency,” a study of relationships between the linguistic development of adult native speakers of English and heritage learners acquiring less commonly taught languages and their global proficiency ratings on the ILR scale. Currently, with Gisela Granena, he is working on a study of maturational constraints on the acquisition of Spanish by native speakers of English and Chinese; with Goretti Prieto Botana and Steve Ross on a study of content teaching through the medium of a foreign language when neither teacher nor students are native speakers of the language; and with Katie Nielson and others on a TBLT project for a large ESL program for migrant Latino and West-African workers and their families, including task-based needs analysis, materials development and teacher education. Recent publications include the Handbook of SLA, co-edited with Catherine Doughty (Blackwell, 2003), Second Language Needs Analysis (Cambridge, 2005), Problems in SLA (Lawrence Erlbaum, 2007), and the Handbook of Language Teaching, co-edited with Catherine Doughty (Blackwell, 2009).

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1. Options in language teaching (LT)

Figure 1: Three major options in language teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options in Language Teaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Option 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>analytic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on meaning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Natural Approach</th>
<th>TBLT</th>
<th>GT, ALM, Silent Way, TPR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immersion</td>
<td>Content-Based LT (?)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural Syllabus</td>
<td>Process Syllabus (?)</td>
<td>Structural/N-F Syllabuses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>etc.</td>
<td>etc.</td>
<td>etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2: The learner’s psychological state in focus on forms and focus on form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus on forms</th>
<th>Focus on form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>decontextualized</td>
<td>contextualized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>proactive</td>
<td>reactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unmotivated</td>
<td>motivated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>often not attending</td>
<td>attending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>processing form and meaning simultaneously</td>
<td>processing form only, meaning and function already understood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>depleted attentional resources</td>
<td>freed-up attentional resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-contingent</td>
<td>contingent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>often unlearnable</td>
<td>usually learnable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cognitive comparison of deviant form and input difficult and unlikely</td>
<td>cognitive comparison of deviant form and input easy and likely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noticing and form-function mapping less likely</td>
<td>noticing and form-function mapping more likely</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Why TBLT?

- Courses need to be relevant, and seen to be relevant, to learners’ needs, especially, but not only, those of students who require functional language abilities for academic, occupational, vocational, or social survival purposes

- Known problems with (i) “interventionist” synthetic syllabuses and LT “methods,” i.e., a focus on forms, and with (ii) “non-interventionist” approaches, i.e., a focus on meaning, and the need for (iii) a viable alternative to both traditions

- Consistency with SLA research findings for analytic syllabuses and methodology, but with a focus on form, i.e., psycholinguistic plausibility

- A desire for real learner-centeredness, learning by doing, and participatory democratic classrooms: (i) course content in TBLT is determined by learner needs and interests, not an externally imposed grammatical syllabus; (ii) attention to language is reactive, responding to the learner’s internal syllabus; (iii) teachability is recognized as being constrained by learnability; (iv) collaborative learning plays an important role; (v) the classroom climate is egalitarian; (vi) the teacher is guide, not god; (vii) testing is criterion-referenced, not norm-referenced

3. Six stages in designing, implementing, & evaluating a TBLT program

1. Needs analysis (identify target tasks, and collect target discourse samples)

2. Syllabus design (target tasks → target task-types → pedagogic tasks)
3. **Materials development** (task-based modules of pedagogic tasks sequenced according to complexity)

4. **Choice of methodological principles** (as distinct from pedagogic procedures)

5. **Student assessment** (can learners perform representative target tasks to criterion?)

6. **Course evaluation** (standard procedures for this)

### 4. Task-based needs analysis

**NA Stage 1**

Apply a battery of rationally sequenced data-collection *methods* (unstructured interviews, logs, questionnaires, etc.) to a representative (usually, stratified random) *sample of sources* (insiders/domain experts of various kinds) to **identify the target tasks** learners need to be able to perform, and the *discourse domains* they need to be able to perform in, in their academic, professional, or occupational lives, to what levels and standards, and accessing what knowledge bases. Use of, and triangulation among, multiple sources and methods is valued, and attention is paid to source x method interactions (see Long, 2005).

**Sources of information for NA (Long, 2005)**

- Published and unpublished literature
- Learners
- Teachers and applied linguists
- Domain experts
- **Triangulated sources**

**Methods of data-collection for NA (Long, 2005)**

- Non-expert intuitions
- Expert practitioner intuitions
- Unstructured interviews
- Structured interviews
- Interview schedules
- Surveys and questionnaires
- Language audits
- Ethnographic methods
- Participant observation
- Non-participant observation
- Classroom observation
- Diaries, journals and logs
- Role-plays and simulations
- Content analysis
- Discourse analysis
- Analysis of discourse
- Register/rhetorical analysis
- Computer-aided corpus analysis
- Genre analysis
- Task-based, criterion-referenced performance analysis
- **Triangulated methods**
- **Triangulated sources x methods**
NA Stage 2

Gather representative samples of target discourse, i.e., language use surrounding successful target task accomplishment by native speakers of the foreign language concerned (sometimes accompanied by samples of non-native attempts at the same tasks), after which analyses of the target discourse are completed in preparation for the design of task-based language teaching materials. The data-based approach is necessary because of the serious mismatches that many studies have revealed between materials writers’ intuitions and real language use (see, e.g., Bartlett, 2005; Chaudron et al, 2005).

[The materials writing process may involve production of elaborated prototypical models of target discourse (see below).]

5. Syllabus design

Figure 3: Steps and processes in syllabus design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps and processes</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[needs analysis]</td>
<td>Flight attendant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(classify at more abstract level)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>target tasks</td>
<td>(1) Serve breakfast, lunch, dinner, drinks, snacks . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Check life-vests, oxygen cylinders, seat-belts . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Check overhead bins, luggage stowed under seats, passengers in assigned seats . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>target task-types</td>
<td>(1) Serve food and beverages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Check safety equipment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(3) Prepare for take-off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(derive)</td>
<td>(1a) Identify choices between two food items (taped cues + picture choices)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(classify and sequence)</td>
<td>(1b) Identify choices among multiple items (ditto)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>task syllabus</td>
<td>(1c) Respond to taped choices when some items are unavailable (ditto)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1d) Role play (actions + polite formulae) . . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1n) Full simulation with verbal presentation of choices and identification of passenger selections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Materials development (task-based modules) and student assessment

Genuine, simplified, elaborated, and modified elaborated input

Figure 4: Paco sentences

1. Genuine (NS-NS baseline) version
   Because he had to work at night to provide for his family, Paco often fell asleep in class.

2. Simplified version
   Paco had to make money for his family. Paco worked at night. He often went to sleep in class.

3. Elaborated version
   Paco had to work at night to earn money to provide for his family, so he often fell asleep in class next day during his teacher's lesson.

4. Modified elaborated version
   Paco had to work at night to earn money to provide for his family. As a result, he often fell asleep in class next day during his teacher's lesson.

   **provide for** means
   a. educate
   b. leave
   c. support

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the Paco sentences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NS</th>
<th>Simplified</th>
<th>Elaborated</th>
<th>Modified &amp; Elaborated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Words</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentences</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s-nodes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words per sentence</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6.33</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s-nodes per sentence</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(For the full rationale and more examples of input elaboration, see Long, 1997; Long & Ross, 1993, 2009; Yano, Long, & Ross, 1994)
**Sample modules of pedagogic tasks**

**Figure 5: Following street directions**

**Target task: Following street directions**

**Pedagogic tasks:**

1. Listen to numerous samples of target discourse surrounding target-task completion, i.e., genuine examples of NSs giving directions.
2. Listen to fragments of elaborated directions while tracing them on a very simple, 2-D map. Within this task, the fragments increase in complexity.
3. Listen to ever more complex fragments while tracing them on a more complex, 3-D map, periodically answering questions like “Where are you now?”
4. In collaborative pairs, read scripted (first pair) and follow (second pair, collaboratively) directions on a simple map.
5. Using real maps, listen to elaborated target discourse samples and follow routes already marked on the map with colored lines.
6. Given a starting point, follow an unknown route, with periodic comprehension checks like “Where are you now?” along the way, and at the end.
7. Do the same as in PT 6, but in one “go,” i.e., without breaks or comprehension checks along the way, but labeling the building/pace/etc. on the maps at the end of each route as evidence of having successfully reached the destinations.
8. Virtual reality map task. Using video from the target location and audio of the target discourse, complete a simulation of the target task. (This can be used as the exit test if the physical location of the learners is not in the target community). For a Spanish prototype, see, e.g., *En busca de esmeraldas* (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2002).

**Figure 6: Conducting and reporting a social sciences research project**

**Domain:** Social studies/environmental studies/economics/political science  
**Target task-type:** Conduct and report a social sciences research project  
**Target task:** Identify the three most promising sources for future US energy needs

**Duration:** 10 classroom hours and approximately 20 additional hours over 2 weeks

**Problem/Research Questions:**

(1) What factors are likely to influence future US energy needs?  
(2) What are the major potential alternative sources for meeting those needs?  
(3) How do they compare in terms of cost effectiveness and political acceptability?  
(4) To what extent is support for various potential sources influenced by people’s (i) age, (ii) social class, (iii) education, and (iv) political affiliation or orientation?  
(5) Based on your research findings, what are your policy recommendations?
Instructional sequence:

1. Teacher introduces the module -- everything is in target language (TL) throughout -- domain, target task, problem/research questions, materials, and methods, making sure students have an initial grasp of the dimensions of the issue (not seeking their answers to the questions), of the resources available to them (internet, audio- and video-taped news items, current affairs programming, academic publications, newspapers and magazines, interviewees, etc.), of what is required of them, and by when.

2. Students view a selection of video-taped TV news broadcasts, political speeches, current affairs programming, etc., on the issues and options (oil, solar, wind, nuclear, sea, ethanol, etc.), all in the TL. Items are discussed and vocabulary and collocations occurring in the input are brought to students’ attention (in context). Register differences, if any, between different language “levels” in the input are highlighted (in context). Ditto any dialectal, gender-related, or other differences. Readings are assigned -- a variety of sources both (i) to provide useful information on the issues, and (ii) to highlight systematic language variation in the TL, e.g., differences between the language used in informal spontaneous comments in the street versus a formal announcement on the same topic by a politician.

3. Students are instructed in how to begin to research the issues outside the classroom. This will involve some hours searching the internet for sources, viewing a growing library of audio- and video-tapes, newspaper and magazine clippings, and academic writing on the topic. They report back on what they are discovering during subsequent class meetings.

4. Probably working in two or three small groups, the teacher helps students design a questionnaire survey of opinions on the issues, responses to which will enable them to provide at least temporary answers to the research questions. Depending on students’ TL proficiency, basic instruction (in the TL) is offered in questionnaire and survey design, with opportunities taken for specialized vocabulary and collocation work in this area (sampling procedures, item types, item analysis, generalization to population, etc.). Draft questionnaires are reviewed and critiqued by the teacher and students. Drafts are merged to produce one class questionnaire and survey.

5. Lecture in the TL, ideally by a native speaker of the TL, on survey research methods. (Once recorded, always available for re-use.) Readings in the TL on the same topics (with follow-up activities on reading skills).

6. Lecture(s) on current state of alternative energy sources by one or more TL-speaking faculty members, journalists, etc. (taped in country where TL is spoken if necessary. Once recorded, always available for re-use.) Readings on same topics, with follow-up activities on reading skills.

7. Arrangements made and attitude/opinion survey conducted (by class acting together) on samples of TL-speaking respondents. Data analyzed, reported and discussed in class.
8. Live or taped interviews of TL speakers observed by students. (Possibly, written interviews via email, as well.) Attention drawn to language issues in interviews.

9. Students conduct taped interviews of one another on the issues. Following critiques of these and focus on linguistic issues arising, students conduct taped interviews in TL of samples of TL speakers.

10. Tapes are critiqued for language issues. Results of interviews are summarized and reported by students.

11. Students prepare final oral reports of both questionnaire and interview components of the opinion surveys. These are discussed and critiqued in class for both content and language.

12. **Assessment/Exit task(s):** Students make video-taped oral final reports, and if appropriate, written reports, of their study answering the research questions posed. These will be graded. They will also serve as interlanguage samples, stored as part of each student’s portfolio record, and also analyzed with the individual students, providing detailed feedback on their language problems and areas for improvement.

7. **Methodology and Pedagogy**

*Methodological principles* (MPs)

MPs are putatively universally desirable instructional design features, most, but not all, motivated by theory and research findings in SLA, educational psychology, cognitive science and more, which show them to be either necessary for SLA or facilitative of it. The theoretical and empirical support makes them features it is believed should probably characterize any approach to language teaching, task-based or otherwise. Advances in knowledge may eventually show some or (hopefully not) all of them to be wrong, but as in any other field, practitioners must rely on, and are limited to, current understanding of theory and research findings. There are at present ten methodological principles in TBLT (see Figure 10). Some, e.g., MP2: Use task, not text, as the unit of analysis, MP4: Elaborate input, and MP6: Focus on form, are original to the approach; others, e.g., MP1: Support integral education, MP7: Provide negative feedback, and MP10: Individualize instruction, are based on long traditions and the work of numerous scholars in philosophy, SLA, psycholinguistics, language teaching, libertarian education, mainstream curriculum theory, and educational psychology.

*Pedagogic procedures* (PPs)

Whereas methodological principles are putative language teaching universals, *pedagogic procedures* (PPs) are quite the reverse. They comprise the potentially infinite range of local options for realizing the principles at the classroom level. Choice among them is determined by such factors as teacher philosophy and preference; learner age, proficiency, literacy level, aptitude and cognitive style; the nature of the target linguistic features for which the procedures are to be used; and the nature of the learning environment, the latter being especially important in a distance learning context. Selection among the myriad procedures available should vary, albeit rationally and systematically. Many of the choices have to be made spontaneously as a lesson unfolds, and so are
best left to the classroom teacher, who is almost always the most reliable source on local circumstances, and in many cases, e.g., manner of response to unforeseen learner difficulty, the only source. Whereas methodological principles can be assessed as most likely right or wrong at any particular time, given the current state of knowledge, there are no constant “right answers” where pedagogic procedures are concerned. Choice among them is a matter of judgment, with different choices potentially justified at different times with the same learners or at the same time with different learners.

**Figure 7: Methodological Principles in TBLT (from Doughty & Long, 2003)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>L2 Implementation</th>
<th>CALL Implementation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ACTIVITIES</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP1: Support integral education.</td>
<td>Learning by doing; task-based language teaching (TBLT)</td>
<td>Simulation; tutorial; worldware</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP2: Use task, not text, as the unit of analysis.</td>
<td>TBLT (target tasks, pedagogical tasks, task sequencing)</td>
<td>Simulation, worldware</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INPUT</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP3: Elaborate input (do not simplify; do not rely solely on “authentic” texts).</td>
<td>Negotiation of meaning; Interactional modification; Elaboration</td>
<td>Computer-mediated communication/discussion; authoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP4: Provide rich (not impoverished) input.</td>
<td>Exposure to varied input sources</td>
<td>Corpora; concordancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LEARNING PROCESSES</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP5: Encourage inductive (“chunk”) learning.</td>
<td>Implicit instruction</td>
<td>Design and coding features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP6: Focus on form.</td>
<td>Attention; Form-function mapping</td>
<td>Design and coding features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP7: Provide negative feedback.</td>
<td>Feedback on error (e.g., recasts); Error “correction”</td>
<td>Response feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP8: Respect “learner syllabuses”/developmental processes.</td>
<td>Timing of pedagogical intervention to developmental readiness</td>
<td>Adaptively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP9: Promote cooperative/collaborative learning.</td>
<td>Negotiation of meaning; interactional modification</td>
<td>Problem-solving; computer-mediated communication/discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LEARNERS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP10: Individualize instruction (according to communicative needs, and psycholinguistically).</td>
<td>Needs analysis; consideration of individual differences (e.g., memory and aptitude) and learning strategies</td>
<td>Branching; adaptively; autonomous learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. **Student assessment**

As in the example above, student achievement is assessed using *task-based, direct or indirect, criterion-referenced performance tests*. The assessment usually takes the form of the final, exit task in a module of materials. For instance, assume the target task is ‘Understanding a [subject area] lecture.’ After a series of pedagogic tasks, starting with short, elaborated lecturettes, heard twice, with a written outline provided, and followed by increasingly more complex versions, the exit/assessment task may present students with a video-taped lecture (either genuine or a simulation of the target task), followed by a multiple-choice test on the information it contained. Can a student score 80% or better on the information (not the language) in the lecture that a domain expert identifies as what would be expected of a good native TL-speaking student in the field?

Increasing numbers of task-based performance tests are being produced, especially in the vocational and occupational sectors, understandably often in high stakes situations, where predictive validity is at a premium. See, e.g., Coad (1984); McNamara (1996), Van den Branden, Depauw, & Gysen, (2002), and sample items from the test of English Language Proficiency for Aeronautical Communication (ELPAC) at [www.elpac.info](http://www.elpac.info) and the Lancaster Language Testing Research Group’s ELPAC validation study at [http://elpac.info/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=50&Itemid=42&Itemid=1](http://elpac.info/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=50&Itemid=42&Itemid=1)

For examples of task-based testing in the academic sector, see, e.g., Robinson & Ross (1996); Norris et al (1998); Brown et al (2002); Long & Norris (2000); Long et al (2003).

**Selected references**


