

## **Reading Tasks as a Pathway for Embracing TBLT in Asia: A Response to Ellis (2024)**

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### **Abstract**

Building on Ellis's (2024) proposal for a modular language curriculum that combines Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT) in an Asian context, this article argues that reading tasks can facilitate the adoption and implementation of TBLT in Asia. The article begins with a brief review of previous research that highlights the complexities and challenges of implementing TBLT in Asian classrooms, including the misconception that TBLT primarily emphasizes speaking tasks. In response, this article proposes that reading tasks, due to their alignment with instructional practices and cultural expectations in many Asian classrooms, can serve as a more practical and adaptable means for embracing TBLT. Highlighting their ability to deliver target linguistic constructions effectively while integrating other language skills, this article explores the potential of reading tasks to foster authentic and communicative language use, paving the way for a more context-sensitive implementation of TBLT in Asia.

### **Keywords**

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), task-supported language teaching (TSLT), reading task

## **1 Introduction**

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has long established itself as a theory-grounded pedagogic approach to language education. However, as reported in a growing body of research into TBLT in Asia (e.g., [Barnard & Nguyen, 2010](#); [Butler, 2011](#); [Carless, 2007, 2012](#); [Chan, 2014](#); [Kim et al., 2017](#); [Liu & Ren, 2024](#); [McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007](#); [Zheng & Borg, 2014](#)), it appears challenging to embrace TBLT in many Asian foreign language contexts. For one, in many Asian countries, the distinctive characteristics of language education are often overlooked, and language is taught and assessed in much the same way as other academic subjects. Specifically, textbooks are typically overloaded with form-focused exercises to learn target vocabulary and grammar, presented in a few short passages that are subsequently analyzed, manipulated, and memorized through a structuralist approach. This approach, therefore, emphasizes the acquisition of declarative knowledge, wherein students focus on memorizing words and practicing grammatical structures in isolated, decontextualized contexts.

Furthermore, assessment systems in many Asian countries are heavily tied to high-stakes entrance examinations, exerting considerable influence over teaching practices. The dominance of these exams makes it difficult for language education stakeholders to deviate from traditional methods that prioritize test performance. For instance, even a teacher with extensive knowledge of TBLT and a strong commitment to implementing it in the classroom may face resistance if TBLT does not directly contribute to improved test scores. In such cases, schools, colleagues, students, and parents are unlikely to support or cooperate with the adoption of TBLT. Unless the current system of language assessment undergoes significant reform, implementation of TBLT in Asian mainstream school settings will remain a challenge.

Against this background, in his 'Key Constructs in Language Teaching' article, Ellis (2024) proposes a modular curriculum that combines TBLT and Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT) as a practical and adaptable solution for addressing challenges in Asian contexts. In this modular framework, TBLT and TSLT coexist independently rather than being fully integrated. The task-based component focuses on fostering implicit knowledge, while the structured component targets explicit knowledge, acknowledging their distinct contributions to language learning. This flexibility allows teachers to adapt based on contextual demands, such as large class sizes, limited teaching materials, or the necessity to prepare students for traditional examinations. For instance, in test-driven environments, the structured component can be prioritized, with TBLT employed to complement classroom instruction. Ellis emphasizes that the modular curriculum can offer teachers the flexibility to address context-specific constraints while still adhering to theoretically-grounded pedagogical frameworks.

While supporting his proposal, this paper further attempts to highlight the role of reading tasks, which has long been unattended in TBLT literature. To reveal the benefits of reading tasks in Asian context, this article first reviews selected studies on the actual practices and complexities of adopting TBLT in different countries in Asia (e.g., Carless, 2007; Kim et al., 2017; Liu & Ren, 2024; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007; Zheng & Borg, 2014). Based on the view, this article discusses the potential of reading tasks as a catalyst to promote TBLT in Asian foreign language contexts.

## **2 TBLT in Asia**

Extant studies have explored TBLT in Asian countries such as Thailand, Hong Kong, China, Japan, and Korea (e.g., Barnard & Nguyen, 2010; Butler, 2011; Carless, 2007, 2012; Chan, 2014; Kim et al., 2017; Liu & Ren, 2024; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007; Zheng & Borg, 2014). This section will present a brief review of selected studies that reported how TBLT is implemented in Asia.

In Hong Kong context, Carless (2007) investigated the implementation of TBLT in secondary schools, where it had been officially introduced into the curriculum. Despite this, TBLT had not been widely adopted. Several barriers were identified, including large class sizes, an exam-driven education system, a lack of teacher expertise in task-based methods, and a preference for more traditional instructional approaches such as Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP). Teachers' beliefs about the value of explicit grammar instruction and their alignment with teacher-centered practices further hindered the integration of TBLT into the classroom. Through semi-structured interviews with secondary school teachers and teacher educators, Carless uncovered significant discrepancies between the principles of TBLT and the teaching realities in Hong Kong, such as inadequacy of speaking tasks in Hong Kong English classrooms, underscoring the importance of adapting TBLT to fit the local context. He suggests that a modified version of TBLT that aligns with teacher beliefs and the constraints of the educational system may be recommended to promote TBLT in Hong Kong.

Zheng and Borg (2014) and Liu and Ren (2024) highlighted the challenges of implementing TBLT in the context of curriculum reform in China. Zheng and Borg (2014) examined how three secondary-school English teachers interpreted and applied TBLT within the framework of a national curriculum that promoted task-based approaches. Interviews and classroom observations revealed that teachers

often misunderstood the core principles of TBLT, equating it with communicative activities such as speaking exercises, pair work, or group discussions. This narrow understanding overlooked defining features of TBLT, such as the focus on non-linguistic outcomes. Additionally, while one younger teacher adhered to the curriculum's task-based guidelines despite challenges in classroom management, the two experienced teachers maintained a preference for explicit grammar instruction. Their resistance was influenced by entrenched teaching beliefs shaped by years of traditional practice. In other words, this study demonstrated that contextual factors such as large class sizes, varying student proficiency levels, time constraints, and exam pressures also impeded the effective implementation of TBLT in China.

Zheng and Borg's (2014) research was extended by Liu and Ren (2024), which identified additional barriers, including the lack of suitable task-based textbooks and limited professional development opportunities for teachers. While efforts had been made to increase TBLT training, teachers expressed a need for greater emphasis on task design, assessment, and evaluation. Furthermore, time limitations and the demands of a form-focused curriculum restricted teachers' ability to incorporate TBLT into their lessons. Large class sizes worsened the issue, leading to challenges in classroom management, limited student interaction, and reduced engagement in task-based activities. Together, both studies underscore the need for systemic support, including curriculum adjustments, professional training, and resource development, to enhance the feasibility of TBLT in China.

McDonough and Chaikitmongkol (2007) and Kim et al. (2017) took a long-term approach to examine the suitability of TBLT in Thailand and Korea, respectively. McDonough and Chaikitmongkol (2007) conducted teachers' and learners' responses to a newly introduced task-based course in Thailand over a 12-month period. Through analyzing task evaluations, interviews, observations, and field notes, the study revealed that both groups exhibited increasingly positive attitudes toward the course over time. Students became more autonomous in their learning and developed transferable academic and metacognitive skills. More specifically, while concerns were raised regarding the adequacy of TBLT initially, both teachers and learners eventually recognized the course's relevance to real-world academic needs. The study also highlighted the critical need for sufficient time and institutional support to help both teachers and students adapt to the TBLT approach. McDonough and Chaikitmongkol concluded that the feasibility of TBLT depends on tailoring it to local educational cultures and contexts, including the unique characteristics of schools, teachers, and students. This study demonstrates that, while TBLT has great potential in Thailand, its success relies heavily on gradual adaptation and contextual sensitivity.

Kim et al. (2017) investigated university students' perceptions of TBLT in South Korea. The study involved 27 Korean learners of English enrolled in a compulsory TBLT-based English course taught by an experienced instructor. Task materials were designed based on needs analysis, focusing on themes relevant to students' campus experiences and future careers. Data collection included learner perception surveys and portfolio analyses, with both qualitative and quantitative methods employed to provide a comprehensive understanding of learners' responses. The findings indicated that while students developed a greater interest in the TBLT approach over time, their perceptions of its effectiveness remained relatively neutral. Students viewed TBLT as particularly beneficial for vocabulary acquisition but less effective for grammar learning compared to traditional approaches. They appreciated opportunities for interaction, speaking practice, and task repetition, which they found engaging. However, the study also highlighted the influence of confounding factors, such as task order and topic selection, on learners' overall attitudes toward TBLT. Kim et al. concluded that while TBLT holds promise for fostering engagement and interaction, its perceived utility among learners may be limited without clear demonstrations of its effectiveness in areas such as grammar learning. The study stresses the importance of aligning TBLT practices with learners' needs and expectations to ensure its success in Korean classrooms.

The reviewed studies collectively highlight the complexities of implementing TBLT in Asian foreign language learning contexts. While TBLT has demonstrated potential benefits, including increased learner

autonomy (McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007) and opportunities for interaction (Kim et al., 2017), its integration into traditional education systems remains challenging. Common barriers include large class sizes (Carless, 2007; Liu & Ren, 2024), exam-oriented curricula (Liu & Ren, 2024; Zheng & Borg, 2014), and limited teacher training or understanding of TBLT principles (Carless, 2007; Zheng & Borg, 2014). To address these barriers, it is essential to develop practical, context-sensitive strategies that align TBLT with the unique characteristics of Asian foreign language education. Given the centrality of written input in Asian classrooms, incorporating reading tasks into TBLT frameworks may provide a more feasible and culturally attuned pathway to promote authentic and communicative language use. The next section explores this potential in greater depth.

### 3 Pedagogical Potential of Reading Tasks in Asian Contexts

In light of this background, I propose that reading tasks can better address the specificities of language education in Asian foreign language settings. A prevalent misconception among language teachers—and even some researchers—is that tasks should involve output production, particularly speaking. However, as aptly pointed out by Ellis and Shintani (2014), tasks can incorporate any of the four language skills. Long (2015) also clarifies that listening or reading tasks can serve important roles for beginning-level learners, and Ellis (2024) further emphasizes that input-based comprehension tasks can effectively deliver target linguistic features, often in the form of focused tasks (Shintani & Ellis, 2010; Zhao & Ellis, 2022; Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2002).

One possible reason for why reading is sometimes not considered appropriate for TBLT is the prevalent misunderstanding that it is a passive, and therefore not very communicative, process in which readers simply extract information from a text. However, reading is an active process in which readers engage with the text by pursuing diverse reading objectives, drawing on prior knowledge, and continuously interpreting the content and the author's point of view (Grabe, 2009). Moreover, in real-world language use situations, we often encounter communicative reading tasks, such as understanding weather warning announcements to ensure our safety, reviewing a rental contract before signing it, following a manual to assemble furniture, comparing product specifications before making a purchase, or taking medication as instructed on a prescription. These examples demonstrate that reading tasks can present communicative demands, prompting learners to engage in cognitive processes that support second language (L2) acquisition. For example, consider the following task.

#### *Planning a School Cultural Exchange Program*

Read the proposals from four teachers below, each suggesting a cultural exchange activity for the school's international exchange program. Consider the strengths and potential benefits of each teacher's proposal. Then decide which activity the school should organize based on the teachers' ideas and methods.

##### Proposal 1: MRS. BROWN, History Teacher (aged 45)

If the school were to host students from other countries, Mrs. Brown suggests organizing a historical tour of the local area. She believes it is important that students explore the region's history as though they were stepping back in time. She also recommends that the visiting students experience what life would have been like 100 years ago through interactive museum exhibits.

##### Proposal 2: MR. TAYLOR, Music Teacher (aged 38)

Mr. Taylor proposes a music exchange workshop. He insists that it is crucial students be exposed to both traditional and contemporary music from different cultures. If chosen, he would arrange for students to play instruments as if they were part of a global orchestra and

exchange songs from their home countries.

Proposal 3: MS. CLARK, Language Teacher (aged 29)

Ms. Clark recommends a language immersion program. She suggests that students practice speaking as though they were living in another country, using role-plays and cultural scenarios. If her idea were accepted, she would ensure that students be challenged to think and speak entirely in their target language during the program.

Proposal 4: MR. WILSON, Science Teacher (aged 50)

Mr. Wilson's idea involves a science collaboration project. He proposes that students work on environmental issues as if they were professional scientists. He emphasizes that it is important students be encouraged to solve real-world problems through teamwork and innovation.

The above reading task satisfies Ellis and Shintani's (2014) criteria for a task. First, the primary focus is on meaning, as the task goal is not to draw learners' explicit attention to forms. There is a gap in that each learner would have different preferences and rationales behind their choices. To compare and choose a school activity, learners must rely on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources. Finally, the task has a clearly defined communicative outcome: selecting one school activity from the four options. Additionally, the task is a focused task, as the text is designed to expose learners to a target grammatical structure—specifically, the English subjunctive. Importantly, this reading task can easily evolve into an integrated task involving other language skills. For instance, learners could share their choices with peers, transforming the activity into a reading-speaking integrated task. In this regard, reading tasks naturally lend themselves to integration with other language skills, closely mirroring real-world communicative tasks, such as ordering food after reading a menu, filling out a medical history form at a hospital following the instruction, or reading an email and replying to it.

On top of this, for learners situated in foreign language contexts as in Asia, where opportunities for oral input and authentic communicative interactions are limited, reading serves as a major source of comprehensible input that goes beyond its traditional role as a comprehension skill. Compared to speaking tasks, which often place a clear emphasis on oral fluency, reading tasks may feel more familiar and approachable to learners, making them easier to integrate into Asian foreign language classrooms. Furthermore, as Carless (2007) noted, tasks built around written input may be perceived as having greater pedagogical value in Asian settings, where reading and writing traditionally receive heightened emphasis.

Thus, reading tasks offer a practical and culturally aligned venue for promoting TBLT in Asian classrooms. They can foster greater learner cooperation and engagement while addressing the systemic constraints that make speaking tasks more difficult to implement. Additionally, the alignment of reading tasks with the written nature of most language assessments in Asia enhances their feasibility and acceptability for both teachers and learners. Given the centrality of reading in Asian foreign language education, reading tasks can play an essential role in promoting TBLT as a sustainable pedagogical approach that supports communicative language learning while respecting local educational cultures and constraints.

## 4 Conclusion

Building on Ellis's (2024) proposal of a modular curriculum that combines TBLT and TSLT, this article highlighted the potential of reading tasks as a practical and adaptable approach to expanding TBLT in Asian contexts. With their flexibility and alignment with existing teaching practices, reading tasks can

serve as a catalyst for adapting TBLT to the unique demands of Asian classrooms. Given the central role of written input in these settings, reading tasks offer a culturally sensitive and feasible pathway for embracing TBLT, while also providing opportunities to seamlessly incorporate other language skills in authentic, communicative contexts. Further research into the pedagogical value of reading tasks is essential, particularly within specific local educational settings and from a longitudinal perspective. The long-overlooked role of reading tasks in TBLT literature may hold the key to addressing the persistent challenges in adopting TBLT in Asia.

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