

The Supplementary Role of TSLT for TBLT: A Response to Ellis (2024)

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Abstract

Ellis (2024) proposed a modular curriculum model that combines task-based language teaching (TBLT) and task-supported language teaching (TSLT) to address varied learning stages and instructional contexts. TBLT emphasizes developing fluency through incidental learning, while TSLT focuses on improving accuracy through intentional learning. Our response reviews the development of TBLT in China, and discusses the applicability of Ellis's modular curriculum model to the instructional context in China, where teaching prioritizes exam performance. The core question of the discussion is "Does the model effectively align with the goals and challenges of English education in China? If so, which aspects demonstrate its compatibility? If not, what limitations hinder its practical application?" Specifically, it discusses the balance between fluency and accuracy in language teaching by addressing the core question in three sub-questions: (1) Is TBLT sufficient for fostering accuracy? (2) Is TSLT an effective supplement for developing accuracy? (3) When should TSLT complement TBLT during teaching? While TBLT has significantly enhanced fluency in the instructional context in China, incorporating TSLT at targeted stages is critical for improving accuracy. We conclude with pedagogical and theoretical implications for adapting the modular curriculum to the instructional context, recommending the modular curriculum should be tailored to students' proficiency levels and instructional objectives.

Keywords

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT), modular curriculum, the instructional context in China

1 Introduction

Whether task-based language teaching (TBLT) is effective in Asian instructional contexts remains debated (Ellis, 2024; Littlewood, 2014). Teachers in Asian countries face the challenge of preparing students for standardized examinations (e.g., the National Entrance English Examination in China),

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which heavily emphasize vocabulary and grammar (Carless, 2009; Cheng & Curtis 2004; Liu et al., 2021). In this score-oriented context, where there is a strong emphasis on accuracy in exams, Chinese primary and secondary school English teachers often favor to explicitly teach grammars using more traditional teaching approaches such as the Present-Practice-Production (PPP) model. Researchers and teachers are still skeptical that TBLT can effectively cultivate students' core competencies in English language learning (Bui, 2024; Chen & Lambert, 2024).

Recently, however, there has been renewed interest in TBLT as a mainstream teaching approach worldwide (Ellis, 2019, 2024). Advocates note its advantages in teaching practice. One key advantage is that TBLT focuses on meaningful communication, effectively developing learners' overall language competence (e.g., Ellis, 2024; Long, 2015). TBLT also enhances learner engagement by encouraging active participation and fostering their investment in learning processing (e.g., Lambert et al., 2021). Finally, TBLT integrates different language skills, providing both positive and negative evidence to support learners' language development (e.g., Li et al., 2016).

Despite these benefits, TBLT continues to face challenges among teachers, researchers, and students in specific contexts (Ellis et al., 2020). To address such concerns, task-supported language teaching (TSLT) has gained attention as a structure-oriented approach. Unlike TBLT, TSLT employs tasks as "methodological devices for practicing specific structures" (Ellis, 2019, p. 2). PPP, a typical TSLT, effectively builds basic L2 competence for specific linguistic content but is less effective for developing advanced proficiency (DeKeyser, 2020).

In this context, we believe that Ellis's modular curriculum model offers a timely and theoretically robust solution. Combining TBLT for fluency and TSLT for accuracy provides a framework to address the concerns of frontline English teachers and researchers in China. This model holds promise for optimizing learners' performance through the structured implementation of tasks.

In this response, we begin by providing a brief summary of Ellis's modular curriculum model, followed by an overview of the current state of TBLT in China to provide essential background context. In the following session, we evaluate the application of the model in the instructional context in China, focusing on the compatibility with the goals of English education in China and identifying both its strengths and limitations. To structure the discussion, a core question with three key concerns is examined in detail. Finally, we discuss the difficulties that may arise when implementing the model and the pedagogical implications for English teaching in China.

2 Rod Ellis's Perspective on a Modular Curriculum Model

2.1 TBLT and TSLT

The core construct of both TBLT and TSLT are related to a "task." The four criteria for a "task" refer to "the primary focus is on meaning; there is some kind of gap; learners rely mainly on their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources; there is a clearly defined communicative outcome" (Ellis, 2024, p. 2). However, there is no rigidity in distinguishing between tasks and activities. If an activity is task-oriented, Ellis views the task-oriented activity as a task to some extent (Ellis, 2024).

Based on Ellis's explanation, Ellis (2024) explicitly distinguished TBLT and TSLT in "how the content of a language program is established and sequenced and in how lesson plans involving tasks are constructed" (p. 7). TBLT is not a monolithic method, but approaches. Four principles for TBLT approaches were summarized "(1) the primary of 'task'; (2) no a prior explicit language teaching; (3) focus on form; (4) explicit post-task work on language problems" (Ellis, 2024, p. 6). Tasks in TBLT provide incidental implicit learning and focus on form (FonF) in syllabus design and implementation. The core syllabus design of TBLT is process-based, emphasizing the use of language for meaning without intervention in fluency (Ellis, 2024).

However, there are two main differences between TBLT and TSLT. One difference is that the content of a language program is organized. Another difference is the construction of tasks in the design of lesson plans. Unlike TBLT, two critical principles for TSLT are a prior explicit language teaching and focus on forms (FonFs) (Ellis, 2024). Tasks in TSLT provide explicit, intentional learning and FonFs with a set of linguistic units. The core design of TSLT is production-based, focusing on specific linguistic content with intervention on accuracy (Ellis, 2024).

2.2 Focused and unfocused tasks

The key pedagogical implication of Ellis's modular curriculum model is how to sequence tasks to optimize learners' overall task performance regardless of TBLT and/or TSLT. (Ellis, 2019; Ellis et al.,). The definition of unfocused tasks refers to "provide learners with opportunities of using language in general communicatively" (Ellis, 2009, p. 223). In contrast, the definition of focused tasks is defined as "provide opportunities for communicating using some specific linguistic feature (typically a grammatical structure)" (Ellis, 2009, p. 223).

In the "pure" TBLT, only unfocused tasks are used in language practice (Long, 2015). However, Ellis explicitly states that focused and unfocused tasks could be used in both TBLT and TSLT as a means of consciousness-raising tasks without practice activities (Ellis, 2009, 2019, 2024). The difference between TBLT and TSLT is the awareness of learners on target forms in task implementation (Ellis, 2009, 2024). Specifically, TBLT focuses on the incidental learning process in which learners are unaware of the target forms in focused and unfocused tasks. However, TSLT is the intentional learning process in which learners know the target forms in focused tasks via pre-task explicit instruction. There is no strict distinction in task types between TSLT and TBLT that both focused and unfocused tasks could use in TBLT and/or TSLT.

2.3 Two complementary components

The modular curriculum model proposed by Ellis (2019, 2024) addresses the theoretical incompatibility between TBLT and TSLT by maintaining their coexistence as distinct yet complementary components. Ellis's modular curriculum model prioritizes TBLT as the core component, particularly at the early stages of learning, to promote fluency via incidental learning through negotiation on meaning. At intermediate and advanced proficiency levels, TSLT assumes a supportive supplement, targeting specific linguistic features not incidentally acquired through TBLT. The model avoids the limitations of integrated models such as the PPP model, positioning TSLT as an accuracy-focused supplement for TBLT as the core of the model focused on fluency.

In sum, Ellis's modular curriculum model's primary focus of the model is to develop fluency first via TBLT, then focus on accuracy via TSLT (Ellis, 2019, 2024). The model is characterized by its non-integration, flexibility, teacher autonomy, and resource-oriented design. Keeping TBLT and TSLT individually, the model enables flexibility to diverse learner needs and instructional contexts while ensuring a balance between focus on forms and spontaneous focus on form. This non-integrated approach allows TBLT to lead a dominant role in the curriculum. At the same time, TSLT addresses specific linguistic challenges as needed, aligning with Ellis's argument for flexibility in sequencing task-based and structural components. Ellis's modular curriculum model also empowers teachers to tailor focus-on-form strategies and provide appropriate corrective feedback to the specific requirements in instructional contexts. Its resource-oriented nature further enhances the utility, providing teachers with practical resources, such as checklists of common morphosyntactic challenges and repositories of teaching materials, to support lesson design and task implementation.

3 TBLT in China

TBLT initially gained attention among Chinese researchers and frontline teachers in the early 21st century as part of the English Curriculum Reform in China (Cheng & Curtis, 2004; Luo & Yi, 2013; MOE, 2001). TBLT was widely recommended in nationwide teacher training programs and quickly became a primary approach in English teaching from 2001 to 2011 (Luo & Yi, 2013), due to TBLT's endorsement of the English Curriculum Reform.

However, several years after its adoption, researchers identified significant mismatches between TBLT principles and the practical problems of English language teaching in China (Littlewood, 2014; Liu & Ren, 2024). Four primary challenges have hindered TBLT's implementation in China. The most obvious one is the organized form of TBLT, relying heavily on group collaborative discussions, which is often viewed as impractical in large-class capacity (more than 40 persons in each class), typically for Chinese primary and secondary public schools (Littlewood, 2014; Zheng & Borg, 2014; Zhu & Shu, 2017). Additionally, TBLT diminishes the teacher's control in class, sometimes rendering it weakened or marginalized (Liu & Ren, 2024). Furthermore, one principle of TBLT emphasizes enhancing learners' language-use competence through "learning by doing," placing less emphasis on the systematic learning of language knowledge required by the English syllabus (Liu & Ren, 2024; Liu et al., 2021; Zhu & Shu, 2017). The focus on learning by doing has been criticized as unsuitable for the characteristics of the Chinese learning environment, without aligning with the demands of China's foreign language education policy and broader social expectations (Littlewood, 2014). Standardized testing is still a primary form of assessment in English teaching, which is viewed as a major factor to TBLT implementation (Liu et al., 2021; Zhu & Shu, 2017). Finally, critics have observed ineffective classroom practices because frontline teachers misunderstand the definition of tasks on TBLT's theoretical foundations and confuse TSLT with TBLT in teaching practice (Zheng & Borg, 2014; Zhu & Shu, 2017).

This year (2024) offers an opportunity for the resurgence of TBLT in language teaching in China. In September 2024, new versions of English textbooks for primary and secondary schools were adopted, emphasizing higher demands on learners' language competence (MOE, 2024). In addition, to promote the integration of TBLT into English teaching, the first TBLT Chinese national conference was held in October 2024 in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China. This event brought together about 300 frontline teachers and researchers for in-depth discussions on the theoretical and practical aspects of TBLT in the instructional context in China. The conference indicates a renewed interest in TBLT among teachers and researchers, driven by the challenges of English teaching and a search for innovative teaching methods within China's English foreign language teaching (EFL) contexts.

4 A Modular Curriculum Model: Is It Appropriate for the Instructional Context in China?

Given the current state of English education in China, it is essential to evaluate the suitability and effectiveness of Ellis's modular curriculum model in addressing the specific needs of the instructional context in China. The core question guiding this discussion is: "Does the model effectively align with the goals and challenges of English education in China? If so, which aspects demonstrate its compatibility? If not, what limitations hinder its practical application?" To provide a structured analysis, the primary question is further broken down into the following three sub-questions:

- Is TBLT sufficient for developing accuracy?
- Is TSLT an effective supplement for developing accuracy?
- When should TSLT complement TBLT during teaching?

4.1 Is TBLT sufficient for developing accuracy?

Although Ellis's modular curriculum model clearly states the core role of TBLT, is it effective in improving the accuracy of specific target forms? Researchers and teachers still question the role of TBLT. A key question remains whether TBLT, with an incidental focus on form (FonF) and lack of explicit grammar instruction, is sufficient to enhance learners' grammatical accuracy in task performance.

TBLT emphasizes developing learners' overall natural language use, prioritizing communicative competence over focusing solely on accuracy (Ellis, 2019, 2024). Unlike traditional approaches that emphasize explicit correction, TBLT handles grammar errors differently. Specifically, when learners make errors in specific grammar forms, TBLT does not directly correct learners' errors but attracts learners' attention to problematic forms incidentally without interfering with the communication. TBLT also provides tailored feedback that aligns with L2 learners' interlanguage needs. Significantly, this process relies on the learner being ready to learn certain grammatical forms. If learners are ready to learn target forms, they could acquire specific grammar forms during the negotiation on meaning (Long, 2015; Long & Robinson, 1998). However, learners who are not ready for target forms might have difficulties acquiring them via negotiation on meaning (Ellis, 2009, 2019, 2024).

Previous research has confirmed the effect of TBLT on improving fluency (e.g., Lambert et al., 2021; Ellis et al., 2020). However, researchers debate the supplementary effect of TSLT on TBLT in Ellis's modular curriculum model. Some researchers (Bui, 2024; Long, 2015) propose a "pure" TBLT model in which TBLT is enough for language use, and TSLT is not necessary for accuracy. Grammar could also be taught in the post-task stage in the ideal "pure" TBLT model (Bui, 2024).

Indeed, TBLT could positively affect grammar accuracy in the "pure" TBLT model, particularly by providing opportunities for learners to practice language in meaningful contexts. However, the extent to which TBLT influences the accuracy of target forms is still under investigation. Although limited comparative studies between TBLT and TSLT have been conducted on specific grammar forms, the findings are inconsistent, with mixed results depending on the salience of the target forms (e.g., Chen & Lambert, 2024; Li et al., 2016). In addition to this inconsistency, designing studies to account for all variables in the operationalization and implementation of tasks makes it difficult to determine whether TBLT or TSLT is more effective in enhancing accuracy (Ellis, 2009).

Further complicating the issue is the persistent gap between teachers' beliefs and their actual classroom practices in China. Liu et al. (2021) conducted a mixed-method study involving 66 EFL teachers, examining their beliefs about TBLT. The results revealed that while the majority of teachers (80% of the 66 participants) expressed willingness to implement TBLT, their understanding of its principles remained limited. As a result, many teachers continued to rely on traditional structural syllabi, such as PPP, to prepare College English Band 4 and 6. Zheng and Borg (2014) and Zhu and Shu (2017) highlighted that experienced frontline teachers favored TSLT with explicit grammar instruction over TBLT. This reliance is influenced by deeply ingrained beliefs about the effectiveness of explicit grammar teaching (Liu et al., 2021; Zheng & Borg, 2014; Zhu & Shu, 2017). These studies suggest a misalignment between the theoretical emphasis on TBLT and the conscious or unconscious practical reliance on TSLT for accuracy in exam-focused contexts.

Based on the above discussion, it remains challenging to determine whether TBLT alone is sufficient to improve the accuracy of the target grammatical forms. In addition, the preference for and reliance on TSLT among Chinese English teachers, as observed by Liu et al. (2021), Zhu and Shu (2017), and Zheng and Borg (2014) highlight the ongoing need of explicit grammar instruction in addressing accuracy. Given this reality, further exploration of TSLT's effectiveness as a supplement for developing accuracy is warranted. The following section examines the role of TSLT in enhancing learners' accuracy, particularly in comparison to TBLT.

4.2 Is TSLT an effective supplement for developing accuracy?

TSLT, as an intentional focus on forms (FonFs), plays a vital role in developing accuracy with explicit teaching and practice of grammar is required (Ellis, 2019, 2024). The greatest advantage of TSLT is the accuracy of specific grammar forms (FonFs) (Long & Robinson, 1998).

As discussed in the above section on *TBLT in China*, the instructional preferences of teachers and students often depend on the specific requirements of their teaching context. In the Chinese educational system, where grammar accuracy is highly prioritized, teachers may find it challenging to rely solely on TBLT. The need to adhere to official syllabi and align with exam-oriented objectives frequently influences instructional decisions, thus prompting the integration of TSLT to address accuracy concerns.

One of the main challenges of implementing TBLT in China lies in the reliance on incidental learning. In the “pure” TBLT, the flexibility during tasks, while aligned with the principles of communicative language teaching, conflicts with Chinese teaching policies that emphasize pre-determined grammar forms (Liu et al., 2021; Liu & Ren, 2024). Teachers in China are expected to design lessons that strictly follow the official syllabus, which requires the systematic coverage of specific grammar forms (Liu & Ren, 2024). Some researchers argue that TBLT’s emphasis on meaning-focused instruction often neglects the systematic learning of language knowledge prescribed by the English syllabus, thereby limiting its applicability in the context (Cheng & Curtis, 2004; Littlewood, 2014).

Another limitation of TBLT in China relates to the exam-driven nature of its instructional environment. Preparing students for standardized tests on English, which heavily emphasize vocabulary and grammar accuracy, remains a central focus of English teaching in China. In this context, TBLT’s limited emphasis on explicit grammar instruction may result in insufficient accuracy, leading to poorer performance on high-stakes exams (Hinkel & Fotos, 2002). Consequently, while TBLT promotes communicative competence, it does not fully address the needs of students who are required to achieve high scores in grammar-focused assessments. The score-oriented instructional context further reinforces the importance of integrating TSLT into the curriculum to address these gaps in the context in China.

Given these challenges, TSLT could be used as a supplement to TBLT in the instructional context in China to satisfy the concerns about abiding by syllabi and acquiring high scores on tests. By integrating explicit grammar instruction into a primarily meaning-focused framework, teachers can ensure that students not only develop communicative competence but also achieve the level of accuracy required by the national syllabus and standardized tests. However, the integration of explicit grammar instruction and meaning-focused tasks raises an important question: when should teachers balance TSLT and TBLT in the teaching practice to maximize the benefits of both approaches?

4.3 When should TSLT complement TBLT during teaching?

According to Ellis (2024), TSLT is introduced at intermediate and advanced stages of language learning to address “specific language items that have not been mastered incidentally” (Ellis, 2024, p. 9). While TBLT promotes implicit learning through meaningful communication, certain persistent language forms often require explicit instruction for mastery. TSLT provides a structured approach to target these specific items, enabling learners to refine their language competence through focused and explicit instruction.

In Ellis’s modular curriculum model, the timing that TSLT complements TBLT could arise in several conditions. The primary principle is the need of students addressing recurring errors, such as grammatical inaccuracies in verb conjugation (e.g., third-person singular). In exam-oriented contexts, where TSLT could be effective in preparing students for traditional assessments, teachers may combine task-based and explicit instructional activities within a single lesson or design separate lessons to align with more traditional pedagogical approaches when required, as Ellis (2024) suggests. Furthermore, task focus could be adjusted to meet learners’ needs, with unfocused tasks benefiting beginners and more structured tasks serving advanced learners.

While Ellis highlights the significance of TSLT in complementing TBLT at the upper-intermediate level, he does not provide explicit guidance on how teachers can identify the “specific language items” suitable for targeted instruction through TSLT. To address the gap, we explore the approaches for identifying and assessing target linguistic items in TSLT, with particular attention to the score-centered instructional contexts like China.

The primary consideration for identifying items lies in the features of linguistic structures. Following national teaching policies in China, textbooks aligned with the English curriculum syllabus predefine target forms. Teachers could label complex and salient linguistic target forms as typical instructional forms. For example, relative clauses are a syntactic complex and perceptually salient grammar structure that is difficult to acquire (Chen & Lambert, 2024).

In addition, teachers could assess the linguistic items that students have not yet fully mastered through grammaticality judgment tests (GJTs) and/or task performance with pre-task task performance on focused tasks in target forms.

GJTs require learners to determine if a target form (e.g., passive past tense) is grammatical or ungrammatical and to correct any errors identified in ungrammatical items (Li et al., 2016; Ellis et al., 2019). To prevent learners from guessing the target form during tests, some distractor items unrelated to the target structure should be in GJTs. For instance, Li et al. (2016) incorporated 30 out of the 40 items that were relevant to the target form. Additionally, 10 out of the 40 items served as distractors, which were related to learners had previously learnt before the instruction.

Another approach is to employ focused tasks, involving pre-modified target forms in written and/or oral pushed outputs. For example, Chen and Lambert (2024) used a focused oral narrative task on relative clauses in the pre-task phase. Learners were given three minutes to narrate a story based on a picture set. Each correctly produced target form was awarded one point for accuracy, while grammatically incorrect target forms received a score of zero.

In sum, while Ellis provides guidance in the model, the timing for introducing TSLT to complement TBLT requires further empirical validation. Currently, the assumptions discussed above are often inferred through classroom observations rather than systematic studies. It is essential to design empirical research in the instructional context in China based on the modular curriculum model to investigate the optimal timing for incorporating TSLT into TBLT-based teaching. Future empirical studies would provide concrete evidence to support teachers in making informed decisions about when to shift focus from fluency to accuracy through explicit instruction.

5 Conclusions and Implications

Ellis’s modular curriculum model provides valuable theoretical insights for addressing the challenges faced by TBLT in the score-centered instructional context in China. The model provides a structured framework by combining TSLT and TBLT to meet the dual goals of communicative competence and grammar accuracy, which align with China’s foreign language education policy requirements and broader social expectations for measurable student outcomes. By supplementing TBLT with TSLT at appropriate timing, teachers can ensure that both fluency and accuracy are developed in a balanced manner.

Despite the promising theoretical benefits, the implementation of the modular curriculum model faces practical challenges, particularly regarding the TSLT checklist of linguistic issues. Teachers in China often express uncertainty about how to design focused tasks for morphosyntactic forms within the TSLT framework (Li & Ren, 2024; Zhu & Shu, 2017). Thus, it is essential to create a comprehensive repository of teaching materials, featuring targeted tasks that address specific grammar items from the nationally prescribed English syllabus. The repository would serve as a practical tool for teachers to tailor instruction while adhering to syllabus requirements and ensuring systematic coverage of target forms.

Furthermore, Ellis's modular curriculum model remains a theoretical assumption and lacks empirical data from teaching practices in diverse English teaching contexts. Future research could address this issue by conducting comparative studies between the modular curriculum model and the "pure" TBLT model. These studies should focus on determining the effectiveness of each approach in fostering both accuracy and fluency, with a particular emphasis on identifying the optimal timing and conditions for incorporating TSLT into TBLT-based instruction in the instructional context in China. Empirical evidence obtained from the studies would provide teachers with actionable guidelines for the application of Ellis's modular curriculum model effectively.

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