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Key Constructs in Language Teaching

"Can we play with tasks?": A Response to Ellis (2024)

Mark Feng Teng
Macao Polytechnic University, Macau SAR

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Abstract
Responding to Ellis' (2024) call for a deeper understanding of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT), and a modular curriculum, this article delves into the concept of task engagement within these pedagogical frameworks. It focuses on how TBLT and TSLT, along with a modular curriculum that integrates both approaches, can enhance learner engagement. The article highlights critical issues related to understanding engagement in TBLT, TSLT, and a modular curriculum, emphasizing a need to explore how engagement can be effectively enhanced across these methodologies. By examining the cognitive, social, behavioral, and affective dimensions of engagement, this article contributes to the ongoing inquiry into optimizing task-based teaching and learning practices. Ultimately, it calls for educators and researchers to consider how engagement is like under these diverse approaches, ensuring that tasks are adaptable and effective in engaging diverse learners.

Keywords
Task, TBLT, TSLT, modular curriculum, engagement

1 Introduction

Rod Ellis is an exceptionally kind individual. My first encounter with him was through his early book on Second Language Acquisition (Ellis, 1994). This book left a lasting impression on me, as it showcased Ellis's success in establishing Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research as a legitimate and valuable discipline. His work highlighted how SLA research exists in a symbiotic relationship with various other fields, such as psychology and second/foreign language pedagogy.

It was not until 2024 that I finally had the opportunity to meet Rod Ellis in person at the China Daily Conference in Zhuhai. After the conference, I had the privilege of accompanying him back to the Hong Kong airport. During the journey, he was incredibly gracious and engaged warmly with my family, especially with my youngest daughter, Janelle, who is five years old. She enjoyed making funny faces with Rod. At one point, Rod introduced himself, saying, "My name is Rod, what is your name?" to which Janelle replied, "My name is Janelle, what do you do?" I explained to her, "Rod is a researcher, and he is very famous for his work on tasks." Curious, Janelle then asked, "What is a task?"

Email: markteng@mpu.edu.mo

Indeed, what is a task? This is a very good question. Janelle's curiosity sparked an engaging discussion about what constitutes a task, even though our enthusiastic conversation during the bus trip was a bit too loud for some of the other passengers. I then invited Rod Ellis to contribute an article on task-based language teaching for my journal, *International Journal of TESOL Studies*. He graciously accepted the invitation and expressed his gratitude for the opportunity to share his insights on this important topic.

Understanding what constitutes a "task" in language teaching is crucial, and Ellis (2024) provides a comprehensive definition. A task is defined by specific criteria applied to workplans to determine their validity as tasks. Contrary to the misconception that Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) focuses solely on speaking skills, Ellis's definition applies to both receptive and productive tasks. Drawing on Breen's (1989) distinction, Ellis argues that a task should be defined by the workplan (the materials given to students) rather than the unpredictable process of performing the task. Therefore, 'linguistic challenge' should not be part of the task definition, as it depends on the learners' proficiency, not the workplan itself. A task is a construct used in designing syllabuses, lesson plans, or tests but only becomes meaningful when performed. TBLT lessons revolve around tasks and require a methodology for their implementation, highlighting the importance of distinguishing between task design and its execution. Key criteria for determining a workplan as a task include a primary focus on meaning, the presence of a gap necessitating information exchange, the use of learners' linguistic and non-linguistic resources, and a defined communicative outcome where success is measured by achieving this outcome rather than language accuracy.

In line with Ellis (2021), TBLT is not monolithic, but an approach rather than a fixed method, with several key characteristics (Ellis, 2024). TBLT emphasizes natural language use, focusing on communication rather than language learning. Learner-centeredness is central, though teacher-centered activities can also play a role. While student interaction is important, input-based tasks (listening and reading) are also vital, especially for beginners. TBLT typically favors unfocused tasks, but focused tasks can also be used to target specific linguistic features. The approach includes different stages: pre-task, main task, and post-task, where attention to form can occur in all three (Skehan, 1996). During the pre-task stage, learners may engage in guided planning rather than receiving direct, explicit instruction. In the main task stage, feedback is typically provided on the learners' communication efforts. The post-task stage involves direct and explicit teaching to address any linguistic issues that emerged during the task. The post-task stage does afford an opportunity for students to engage not just in 'noticing' but also 'understanding' their language problems (Ellis, 2024, p. 7). The approach accommodates both unfocused and focused tasks, distinguishing it from traditional, structural-based teaching. In order to allow traditional, structural-based teaching having a place in TBLT, Ellis claimed a need for a modular curriculum.

Ellis' (2024) article addresses confusions about TBLT through suggesting an integration of TBLT and TSLT in a modular curriculum. Differences between TBLT and TSLT include content sequencing and task design. These differences also reflect distinct theoretical positions. TBLT is based on a cognitive view of language learning as holistic and learner-driven. TSLT follows a skill-learning model, progressing from declarative to automatic stages (Dekeyser, 1998). TBLT focuses on incidental learning through language use. TSLT emphasizes intentional learning and practice. Both can involve explicit teaching. TBLT uses implicit and explicit techniques during tasks. Samuda (2001) noted the need for mini-grammar lessons during tasks. Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2002) observed teachers highlighting form preemptively and reactively. TSLT places explicit teaching at the lesson's start. This signals the focus on learning the target structure. It affects how students perform tasks, making them practice rather than use language. In a modular approach, task and structure focus are separate but complementary. Their balance shifts as learners progress. This approach leverages the strengths of both TBLT and TSLT.

After the publication of Ellis (2024) in *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, I, as the editor in chief, received several responses, which I found to be quite interesting to read. Ellis (2024) emphasizes that the primary theoretical and practical difference between TBLT and TSLT lies in the direct teaching of forms, particularly before tasks. To integrate structure-based elements with task-based approaches effectively, he suggests developing a modular curriculum. This approach allows educators to combine the strengths of both methods while preserving their distinct characteristics. This concept of a modular curriculum is particularly compelling as a promising strategy for classroom instruction that merits serious consideration. East (2024) wrote a response from teachers' perspectives, which was also an interesting piece that adds insights to Ellis (2024). East (2024) highlights the practical challenges and adaptations of implementing TBLT in educational settings from teachers' perspectives (see also East, 2012). He begins with an example of a teacher, who reflects on the evolving understanding of TBLT through teacher education and practice. Initially, TBLT enhanced this teacher's knowledge, but in practice, the teacher integrates it with other methods, like "chalk and talk." This reflects a broader trend where teachers blend TBLT with traditional approaches based on classroom needs. Other teachers share varied perspectives, noting TBLT's compatibility with different teaching styles and school cultures. Martin thus argues that while TBLT and learner-centered methods are theoretically favored, actual classroom practices often involve a mix of approaches. Teachers' decisions are influenced by personal beliefs, classroom dynamics, and practical considerations, leading to a flexible continuum of practices rather than strict adherence to TBLT or traditional methods. This eclecticism is seen as practical but can blur the distinctiveness of TBLT, potentially overshadowing its learner-centered focus. A modular curriculum could help maintain a balance, allowing for both form-focused and meaning-focused teaching.

On the other hand, Bui (2024) painted a different picture. He posed a significant challenge in implementing a modular curriculum, which is assessment. Should assessments focus on performance in meaning-focused tasks, as per TBLT principles, or on language accuracy in form-focused assessments, as per TSLT? Alternatively, should both aspects be evaluated in a single assessment? The differing foundations of TBLT and TSLT complicate this decision, according to Bui (2024). His argument has a foundation. TBLT aims to develop implicit knowledge through natural, communicative tasks, aligning with language acquisition theories that emphasize real-world language use (Long, 1985). In contrast, TSLT focuses on explicit knowledge through form-focused instruction, aligning with skill-learning theories that prioritize procedural knowledge and automatization (DeKeyser, 1998). Assessing TBLT involves evaluating communicative and fluent language use in real-life tasks, prioritizing meaning over form (Bui & Huang, 2018). Conversely, TSLT assessments may focus on accuracy and mastery of language forms, prioritizing form over meaning. This is why Bui (2024) claimed it difficult to create a unified assessment framework. However, Bui (2024) does not imply that the modular curriculum lacks value; instead, he believes that Ellis's (2024) proposal for a modular curriculum that combines TBLT with TSLT represents a bold and forward-thinking effort to cater to the varied needs of language learners. This approach seeks to harness the strengths of both methodologies by providing a flexible framework that accommodates different learning styles and objectives. By combining the communicative, real-world focus of TBLT with the structured, form-focused elements of TSLT, Ellis aims to create a comprehensive curriculum that not only enhances language acquisition but also addresses the practical challenges of diverse classroom settings. This innovative proposal highlights the potential for a more adaptable and effective language teaching strategy that can meet the evolving demands of learners in a globalized world.

Ellis (2024) also highlights the distinction between TSLT and the Present-Practice-Produce (PPP) model. While TSLT is often likened to PPP, they are not identical. Ellis claimed that TSLT can bypass the practice stage, moving straight from presenting a target structure to performing a task that uses it. This raises a key question: Is it necessary to explicitly teach language patterns? If so, when should these patterns be introduced? Should students first learn a language pattern, practice it through mechanical drills and discrete exercises, and then apply it in more open-ended language use? Another key question

is whether teaching students language rules before they start a task affects how they perform it? Do they focus on using the language structure correctly, and does this focus influence other aspects like how fluently and complexly they can speak? According to DeKeyser (1998), the PPP method helps students progress from understanding a language feature to using it naturally and automatically. This aligns with Skill Acquisition Theory. Ellis (2024) notes that learning through explicit instruction, like PPP, is different from learning a language naturally, which mostly builds implicit knowledge. Starting with explicit knowledge might lead to it becoming automatic, but it is debated whether this is a disadvantage. Boers (2024) suggests shifting from PPP to APC (Awareness, Practice, Communication) to better support language learning. Boers (2024) notes that PPP is not as rigid as often portrayed. The catchy acronym may oversimplify its flexibility. For example, "presentation" can involve either explicit grammar instruction or inductive learning through examples. "Practice" is not limited to drills but includes diverse activities. "Production" implies output but should also encompass comprehension skills. Shifting from PPP to APC aligns with TBLT's sequence of awareness-raising, practice, and task performance. In the awareness phase, students explore grammar patterns or vocabulary in context, hypothesizing about their functions. During practice, activities should prepare students to integrate language features smoothly in real communication, following Transfer-Appropriate Processing theory. Finally, the communication phase involves students expressing their own content with a clear purpose, such as problem-solving or collaboration.

Returning to the conversation between Rod and my daughter in the bus ride from Zhuhai to the HK airport, after much discussion with Rod, Janelle appeared disinterested and then asked, "Can we play with tasks?" This is indeed another intriguing question, and it is what I want to explore in the next section on task engagement.

2 "Can we play with tasks?": Task Engagement

"Can we play with tasks?" This question invites a deeper exploration into the nature of task engagement within different pedagogical frameworks, such as TBLT, TSLT, and a modular curriculum that integrates both approaches.

2.1 Engagement in TBLT

If, as Ellis (2024) suggests, TBLT aims to facilitate incidental learning through "language use"—where the primary focus is on communicative intent—then task engagement becomes a pivotal element of the learning process. In TBLT, engagement is not just central; it is essential. This approach emphasizes real-world tasks that require learners to use language in authentic and meaningful ways. Engagement in TBLT is multidimensional, encompassing cognitive, social, behavioral, and affective aspects. Learners are encouraged to actively participate, collaborate with peers, and apply critical thinking skills to solve problems. The dynamic and interactive nature of TBLT is expected to result in high levels of learner engagement, as students navigate tasks that closely resemble real-life communication scenarios.

Task engagement refers to the intentional actions taken by learners to successfully complete a learning task. It is a crucial component of TBLT. The cognitive-interactionist paradigm views active participation as both the method and medium for learning (Long, 2015). Engagement primarily relates to the amount of time learners spend actively participating in a task, and it should be assessed by examining their actual language output. According to Platt and Brooks (2002), task engagement involves the procedural strategies or "tools and practices" that learners use as part of their problem-solving toolkit (p.372).

Recent research on task engagement highlights the interconnected nature of cognitive, social, and emotional aspects of engagement. These elements collectively contribute to the quality of student

involvement in task-based interactions (Hiver & Wu, 2023). One critical issue is TBLT emphasizes the necessary conditions for task engagement. It considers how these conditions vary among culturally and linguistically diverse learners, each bringing their own learning goals to the task. Empirical studies on task engagement suggest that the design and implementation of tasks significantly influence learners' engagement. Factors such as the level of support, the challenges presented by tasks, and the choice, sequencing, and focus of tasks play a central role in engaging and maintaining learners' interest (Lambert & Zhang, 2019). Understanding the cognitive and non-cognitive factors that contribute to individual differences in language learning success is also fundamental. As a task unfolds, students' engagement is dynamic and evolves in real-time (Aubrey, 2022). Task engagement does not exist in isolation or independently of task performance; it emerges through the interactions and activities during the task. Various factors at the learner, lesson, task, and post-task levels contribute to students' engagement or disengagement (Aubrey et al., 2022). These factors interact to produce different engagement outcomes. Thus, task engagement relates to input processing, negotiation of meaning, attention to language features, and feedback uptake.

Engagement in TBLT can be particularly challenging for learners in a foreign language context. These challenges often arise because learners must navigate tasks that require them to use the target language authentically and meaningfully, which can be difficult when they are not surrounded by the language in their everyday environment. Additionally, the cognitive demands of processing and producing language in real-time, combined with the social and affective pressures of interacting with peers, can make it difficult for learners to maintain high levels of engagement. Ellis (2024) also acknowledged the challenges of addressing the diverse language proficiency levels within a classroom. Teachers may struggle to design tasks that are appropriately challenging for all students. For instance, input-based tasks might be too difficult for beginners because young learners may lack memory resources and language proficiency to handle the tasks for vocabulary learning (Teng, 2024). This disparity can lead to disengagement among students who find the tasks too challenging. According to Platt and Brooks (2002), task engagement involves procedural strategies or "tools and practices" that learners use as part of their problem-solving toolkit. If tasks are not well-matched to students' proficiency levels, these strategies may not be effectively employed. While Ellis (2024) does not specifically address engagement in TBLT, he notes that students accustomed to teacher-centered learning may struggle to engage with tasks. These students often face challenges in task performance when their linguistic skills are limited, leading them to revert to their first language.

Take engagement is also related to motivation and interest. Keeping students motivated and interested in tasks is essential for sustained engagement. Tasks that do not align with students' personal interests or goals may result in a lack of effort and participation. For instance, a task involving technical writing might not engage students interested in creative writing. The design and implementation of tasks significantly influence learners' engagement, with factors such as support, challenge, and task focus playing central roles (Lambert & Zhang, 2019). Resource availability is another obstacle to be noted in many EFL contexts. Limited access to technology or authentic English materials can hinder the creation of engaging and interactive tasks. This limitation affects both the design of tasks and students' ability to engage with them effectively. Understanding the cognitive and affective factors that contribute to individual differences in task engagement is thus essential (Lambert et. al, 2023). Finally, classroom dynamics can significantly affect task engagement. Managing varying levels of participation and interaction among students of different cultural background is also challenging. A group discussion task might be dominated by a few outspoken students, leaving others disengaged. As tasks unfold, students' engagement is dynamic and evolves in real-time (Aubrey, 2022). Understanding the learner, lesson, task, and post-task level factors that contribute to engagement or disengagement is essential for task design (Aubrey et al., 2022).

Egbert (2020) presents a conceptual model to understand task engagement in technology mediated environment. This model illustrates the relationship between language task engagement facilitators,

language task elements, indicators of task engagement, and the resulting language task outcomes. The language task engagement facilitator outlines the various factors that can facilitate engagement in language tasks, such as authenticity, relevance, value, social interaction, learning support, and autonomy. These facilitators help integrate the learner's cognitive, behavioral, and affective engagement with the task. The language task engagement facilitator is "Integrated" with the "Language task elements," which include the content/topic, instructional groupings, strategies, resources, goals, process, tools, assessment, and the final product. The integrated facilitators and task elements ultimately influence the "Level of language task engagement," which is manifested through behavioral indicators (e.g., participants, attention, effort, persistence) and cognitive/affective indicators (e.g., curiosity, sense of control, language repair, positive affect). Finally, the level of language task engagement ultimately predicts the desired "Language task outcomes," such as language achievement, content achievement, task performance, quality, quantity, attitudes, and metacognitive strategies. The model emphasizes the importance of carefully designing language tasks that engage learners on multiple levels, thereby optimizing language learning outcomes. If this model of task engagement is applied to technology-mediated task interaction, it presents unique challenges, particularly in light of the growing prevalence of foreign language learning in online and hybrid settings.

Synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) modalities, such as text, audio, video, and multimodal chats, influence learner engagement in various ways. Researchers have argued that SCMC shares many of the same engagement benefits as face-to-face (FTF) communication, including attentiveness, opportunities for peer relationship-building, self-correction, active participation, and reduced boredom or frustration (Fredrick Smith & Ziegler, 2023). Moreover, SCMC has been hypothesized to promote greater and more equitable learner participation compared to traditional FTF classroom interactions. For example, Ziegler and Phung (2019) explored engagement across four SCMC environments—text-chat, audio-chat, video-chat, and multimodal-chat (combining video, text-chat, and screen sharing)—and found that video-chat and multimodal-chat resulted in the highest levels of feedback, negotiation, and language-related episodes (LREs), which are key indicators of cognitive engagement. Learners overwhelmingly preferred modalities with a visual component, such as video and multimodal-chat, due to the opportunities for social interaction through gestures, eye contact, and body movement, which enhanced their social engagement.

However, these findings may not apply equally to all foreign language learners of Chinese cultural contexts. For instance, learners from face-saving cultures, such as Chinese students, may be less willing to engage with language in ways that are known to benefit second language (L2) development, such as negotiating form or participating in LREs, particularly in video-chat modalities. Socio-affective concerns, such as the anxiety of speaking in public, or possibly, a need to "save face," can inhibit their willingness to actively engage in such interactions. Qiu and Bui (2022) investigated this phenomenon by analyzing the engagement of 36 Chinese learners performing two decision-making tasks in dyads, either with or without pre-task planning, in both FTF and SCMC modes. Their analysis, based on seven indicators of behavioral, cognitive, and social engagement, revealed that pre-task planning did not significantly impact engagement across the two modalities. Similarly, Teng et al. (forthcoming) examined the effects of different task modes (FTF real-time communication vs. SCMC) on Chinese EFL learners' task engagement and vocabulary learning in oral tasks. Forty Chinese learners completed a decision-making task in dyads under one of the two modalities, and their oral discourse was analyzed using indicators of behavioral, cognitive, social, and emotional engagement. While both modes demonstrated benefits for vocabulary learning, the FTF mode offered richer opportunities for vocabulary acquisition compared to SCMC. The results suggest that the demands of tasks—and their subsequent impact on engagement—vary across modalities and contexts, particularly in technology-mediated, task-based interactions.

One critical issue emerging from these studies is that task demands differ significantly depending on the modality and task conditions, which in turn affect learners' social and affective engagement. For learners from face-saving cultures, such as Chinese students, these socio-affective factors play a

significant role in shaping their engagement with tasks. Task design must account for cultural differences and socio-affective concerns to ensure that learners are not only cognitively engaged but also socially and emotionally supported in their learning environments. Given these challenges, there is a possible need to move towards TSLT. Therefore, it is crucial to examine not only how engagement occurs within TBLT but also to explore how engagement manifests in TSLT.

2.2 Engagement in TSLT

Structural challenges in teaching environments—such as large class sizes, insufficient teaching materials, and the pressure to prepare students for traditional, discrete-point exams—impact task implementation. These documented issues have prompted some commentators, like Littlewood (2014), to suggest moving away from TBLT in favor of more structure-focused approaches, such as TSLT. Ellis (2024) also proposed that advocates of TBLT acknowledge the value of incorporating a post-task stage. This stage does not necessarily require explicit focus on language issues; however, it provides students with the chance to engage not just in "noticing" but also "understanding" their language problems (p. 7). TSLT is based on a skill-learning perspective of language development, where the acquisition of specific language elements progresses from declarative knowledge to procedural and automatic stages (Dekeyser, 1998). Ellis (2024) clarified that while TBLT aims to provide opportunities for incidental learning through 'language use'—where communicative intent is primary—TSLT aims to facilitate intentional learning and automatization through 'practice,' focusing on the mastery of language. These theoretical differences, reflected in program and lesson design, distinguish TBLT from TSLT.

Given this context, fostering engagement in TSLT requires a thoughtful approach that integrates structured learning experiences with task-based activities to support the development of specific language skills. TSLT enhances traditional language instruction by incorporating tasks that reinforce specific language forms or skills within a more controlled environment. This approach often emphasizes cognitive and behavioral dimensions of engagement, where learners practice and apply language points in a task context. Engagement in TSLT can vary significantly depending on several factors. These include the strength and centrality of the tasks within the curriculum, as well as contextual aspects that teachers must consider. These aspects include the individual needs, wants, learning styles, and strategies of learners, as well as the coursebook content, local conditions, classroom culture, school culture, and assessment culture. Each of these factors can influence how tasks are perceived and engaged with by learners. One of the challenges in TSLT is addressing the potential monotony of discrete-point practice exercises and the production stage of tasks. Learners' cognitive readiness for such repeated exercises can vary, with some finding them boring or disengaging. Beyond the characteristics of the tasks themselves, several other elements can influence task engagement for learners. These include the focus and duration of the course, the content of lessons surrounding the tasks, and even the time of day when tasks are conducted. For instance, tasks scheduled at times when learners are more alert and focused may result in better engagement.

According to Ellis (2024), a TSLT syllabus is structured around specific linguistic units to be taught, with tasks serving as pedagogic tools to facilitate this learning. A typical TSLT lesson begins with the explicit presentation of the linguistic targets, which sets a clear focus for both teaching and learning activities. To achieve engagement in TSLT, it is crucial to design tasks that are closely aligned with the learning objectives. This alignment ensures that the tasks are relevant and purposeful, providing learners with a clear understanding of what they are expected to achieve. By creating tasks that directly relate to the linguistic targets, teachers can help students see the practical application of their learning, thereby increasing their motivation and engagement. Providing ample opportunities for practice and feedback is another key strategy for enhancing engagement. Practice activities should be varied and meaningful, allowing students to experiment with language in different contexts and formats. This variety not only keeps students interested but also helps them to internalize language structures and

progress from initial understanding to automatic use. Feedback, both from teachers and peers, plays a critical role in this process by guiding learners and helping them to refine their language skills. Moreover, incorporating reflective activities into TSLT lessons can further deepen student engagement. Reflective activities encourage learners to notice their language use and understand their progress, fostering a deeper awareness of their learning process. This reflection can be facilitated through activities such as self-assessment, peer reviews, and discussions about language choices and strategies. By engaging in reflection, students can develop a more nuanced understanding of their strengths and areas for improvement, which can motivate them to take an active role in their language development.

To fully grasp engagement in TSLT, especially when extending to task engagement as discussed by Hiver and Wu (2023), it is vital to examine the components and indicators of task engagement across cognitive, affective, behavioral, and social dimensions. Cognitively, task engagement involves maintaining alertness, being goal-oriented, and exercising focused and selective attention. It also includes engaging in higher-order thought processes, information processing, mental elaboration, and monitoring task demands. Additionally, cognitive engagement encompasses schema activation, self-monitoring, and self-regulation, all of which are essential for effective learning. Affective aspects of task engagement require attention to the emotions that emerge from task performance, as well as emotional regulation and the satisfaction derived from completing tasks. These emotional elements play a significant role in sustaining motivation and interest in the learning process. Behavioral engagement is reflected in non-verbal cues such as active listening, speaker tracking, and the pursuit of goals. These behaviors indicate a learner's active participation and investment in the task, which are crucial for effective engagement. Socially, task engagement involves collaborative activities like negotiating within or about the task, initiating and maintaining interaction, providing peer correction and feedback, supporting peers, and engaging in language-related collaboration. These social interactions foster a supportive learning environment and enhance engagement by encouraging meaningful language use.

Understanding task engagement in TSLT is critical because it highlights how tasks and task-based interactions create conditions conducive to effective practice. However, if TBLT and TSLT are integrated into a modular curriculum, as suggested by Ellis (2024), the nature of engagement might shift. In such a curriculum, engagement could benefit from the structured focus of TSLT combined with the dynamic, real-world application of TBLT. This integration could potentially enhance engagement by providing learners with a balanced approach that supports both linguistic accuracy and communicative fluency, fostering a more holistic language learning experience.

2.3 Engagement for a modular curriculum

Ellis (2024) discusses the inherent tension in language pedagogy between universalist approaches, which are grounded in theories of language acquisition and general educational principles, and localist approaches, which emphasize the importance of context and individual differences among teachers and learners. Universalist approaches, such as TBLT, advocate for structured methods based on established learning theories. In contrast, localist approaches argue for flexibility and adaptability to specific teaching contexts. However, Ellis suggests that these two positions need not be mutually exclusive but can instead complement each other. A well-theorized approach like TBLT can provide valuable guidance in designing syllabi and selecting teaching materials. Yet, its implementation must allow for flexibility, enabling teachers to make both planned and spontaneous decisions that account for local factors and classroom dynamics.

In a modular curriculum, engagement is fostered through a blend of TBLT and TSLT. This approach provides students with opportunities for practice, meaningful communication, creativity, and personal expression. While TBLT focuses on building learners' confidence and equipping them with essential language skills, it is crucial to address entrenched interlanguage forms at intermediate and advanced stages. This is where TSLT comes into play, supplementing TBLT by providing explicit attention to

specific language items that learners struggle to master incidentally. The task-based component of the modular curriculum involves a syllabus centered around tasks, while the structured component includes a checklist of common linguistic problems encountered at higher proficiency levels. It also features a bank of teaching materials, such as focused tasks, to address these issues. Teachers can use this resource to tailor their instruction based on the actual problems learners face during tasks.

The theoretical rationale for incorporating explicit teaching is that, without it, certain errors may become entrenched in learners' second language systems. Explicit teaching, as part of TSLT, is reactive rather than proactive, building on learners' attempts to use specific forms. Thus, TSLT (or the PPP model) does not replace TBLT but rather supplements it, serving a remedial function to address persistent language issues. In essence, engagement in a modular curriculum highlights the importance of balancing task-based and structured components. This balance ensures that learners benefit from the strengths of both approaches, facilitating a more comprehensive and adaptable language learning experience.

Engagement in a modular curriculum also presents several challenges. From a theoretical standpoint, learners have a limited capacity for processing new information, which can be overwhelmed in a modular curriculum if not carefully managed. This necessitates designing modules that build incrementally on prior knowledge without overloading cognitive resources. Additionally, maintaining motivation can be difficult if modules are perceived as disjointed or irrelevant, such as when students fail to see the connection between a grammar-focused module and a communication task. Social interaction in learning poses a challenge for modular curricula that do not incorporate collaborative tasks promoting meaningful interaction. In practice, students might experience each module as a separate entity, leading to a lack of coherence in their learning journey. For instance, a vocabulary-focused module might not seamlessly integrate with a subsequent conversation skills module, causing students to lose sight of overall learning objectives. Different students may also respond variably to the same module, depending on their learning styles and prior knowledge. A task-based module requiring active participation might engage some students while alienating others who prefer structured, individual learning activities. Teachers, crucial mediators of engagement, face the challenge of switching between different teaching methods and adapting to diverse student needs. For example, a teacher might excel at delivering structured grammar lessons but struggle to facilitate open-ended communicative tasks. Moreover, assessing engagement in a modular curriculum can be complex, as traditional assessment methods may not capture the nuances of student engagement across different modules.

The concept of task engagement has evolved beyond a simplistic, unidimensional perspective that focuses solely on the quantity and quality of language produced by learners during interaction. Today, task engagement is recognized as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses cognitive, social, behavioral, and affective dimensions. It involves heightened attention, active involvement, and participation that manifest not only cognitively but also socially and emotionally. If TBLT and TSLT can be combined in the design of a curriculum, as suggested by Ellis (2024), students still need to dynamically adapt to the demands and situational requirements they encounter, resulting in engagement or disengagement.

3 Concluding Remarks

Responding to Ellis' (2024) interpretation of TBLT, TSLT, and a modular curriculum of integrating TBLT and TSLT, this piece explores task engagement within different pedagogical frameworks, particularly focusing on TBLT, TSLT, and a modular curriculum integrating both approaches. In TBLT, engagement is essential and involves using real-world tasks to encourage active participation, collaboration, and problem-solving. This approach emphasizes cognitive, social, behavioral, and affective dimensions of engagement. TSLT focuses on structured learning, aiming for intentional learning and automatization through practice. It emphasizes cognitive and behavioral engagement, addressing challenges like

monotony and varying cognitive readiness among learners. A modular curriculum blends TBLT and TSLT, aiming to balance task-based and structured components to enhance engagement. However, challenges include managing cognitive load, maintaining motivation, and ensuring coherence across modules.

Reflecting on the question posed by Janelle, "Can we play with tasks?" underscores the critical nature of engagement in task. Playing with tasks implies fostering engagement, which is inherently a multidimensional phenomenon involving cognitive, social, behavioral, and affective aspects. The question of whether we can play with tasks—and if so, how engagement might be enhanced in TBLT, TSLT, or a modular curriculum—invites further exploration and discussion. This inquiry is particularly relevant for educators and researchers like Rod, who are tasked with designing and implementing tasks that effectively engage learners across all dimensions, thereby enhancing both the learning experience and L2 development. I will defer this question to Rod, or other colleagues, for further exploration.

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Mark Feng Teng, Ph.D., is Associate Professor at Macao Polytechnic University. He was the recipient of the 2017 Best Paper Award from the Hong Kong Association for Applied Linguistics (HAAL). His-research portfolio mainly focuses on computer-assisted L2 vocabulary learning and writing. His publications have appeared in international journals, including *Applied Linguistics, TESOL Quarterly,*

Language Teaching Research, System, Applied Linguistics Review, Computer Assisted Language Learning, Computers & Education, Foreign Language Annals, and *IRAL*, among others. His-recent monographs were published by Routledge, Springer, and Bloomsbury. He also edited and co-edited special issues for international journals, including *Journal of Writing Research, Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching,* and *TESOL Journal.* He serves as editor-in-chief for *International Journal of TESOL Studies (IJTS)* and *Digital Applied Linguistics (DAL)*. He was listed in the top 2% of Scientists in the world in the disciplinary areas of Language and Linguistics, based on Stanford University Rankings.