

There is More to the Task: A Response to Ellis (2024)

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Abstract

This article critically responds to Rod Ellis's (2024) proposal for a modular curriculum that involves Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT) without integrating them. Ellis's work is commendable for its clear distinctions between TBLT and TSLT, providing a practical framework that helps language educators navigate the complexities of task-based approaches. His emphasis on the importance of context-sensitive adaptations acknowledges the diverse needs of language learners and promotes flexibility in teaching practices. However, I would argue that the theoretical justification for using explicit instruction to rectify fossilised linguistic errors is insufficient. I contend that TBLT's "focus on form" and post-task "language focus" components can effectively address these issues without resorting to TSLT. Furthermore, I highlight the lack of clarity regarding assessment methods in a dual curriculum, raising concerns about the practical challenges and potential confusion for teachers and learners. Further research is needed to explore these issues as well as the long-term impacts of Ellis's modular curriculum on task-based second language learning in different contexts.

Keywords

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT), modular curriculum, assessment methods

1 Introduction

In the past several years, I have been involved in a number of interesting events in China, including the Reading and Writing in TESOL in the Greater Bay Area Conference in Shenzhen in May 2023, the Global English Education China Assembly in Zhuhai in July 2024, and the TBLT China Conference in Chengdu in October 2024. Many of the conference attendees were frontline teachers in schools, and they appeared highly motivated to keep abreast of the latest developments in language teaching research. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) featured prominently in all these events, becoming one of the hottest topics of discussion and, inevitably, debate. I was frequently asked during the Q&A sessions, particularly at the TBLT Roundtable with Rod Ellis and Yafu Gong at the Zhuhai conference, about the following issues:

- What is a “task” and how is it different from an exercise or a classroom activity?
- Should we teach grammar in TBLT classrooms?
- Is the “weak” version, or a task-supported syllabus, more suitable in EFL contexts like China?
- Is TBLT compatible with examination-oriented contexts like China?
- What is the role of the teacher in TBLT classrooms?

These questions represent not only genuine but also valid concerns from language (predominantly English) teaching professionals. They recurred on different occasions, indicating that they are long-standing, troubling, and confusing areas for ESL and EFL practitioners. Rod Ellis’s latest (2024) article, “Task-based and task-supported language teaching,” in the *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, to my delight, provides a theory-informed yet accessible account that responds to many of these issues.

2 Rod Ellis on TBLT and TSLT

In this article, Rod Ellis aims to clarify the distinctions between Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT), both of which centre around the concept of a ‘task’. Ellis begins by defining what constitutes a task and differentiating it from an exercise. He highlights several definitions from the literature, including the widely cited conceptualisation of a task by Skehan (1996), noting their commonalities and differences. For instance, definitions by Long (1985) and Willis (1996) emphasise real-life application and communicative purpose, while Samuda and Bygate (2008) focus on holistic activities with non-linguistic outcomes. Ellis critiques these definitions, pointing out ambiguities and proposing his own criteria for identifying a task: a primary focus on meaning, the presence of a gap necessitating information exchange, reliance on learners’ linguistic and non-linguistic resources, and a clearly defined communicative outcome (Ellis, 2003; Ellis & Shintani, 2014). He illustrates these criteria with examples, contrasting tasks with exercises to demonstrate the practical application of his definition.

TBLT is characterised by its emphasis on tasks in both syllabus design and implementation methodology, grounded in second language acquisition research (Long, 1985; Skehan, 1998, 2014) and educational theories (Long, 2015) that prioritise experiential learning and implicit knowledge. Ellis identifies key principles common to TBLT, such as the centrality of tasks, the absence of a priori explicit language teaching, and a focus on form during task performance. He acknowledges that TBLT is not monolithic, with variations in how tasks are implemented and how focus on form is managed.

TSLT, on the other hand, employs tasks as pedagogic tools within a syllabus structured around linguistic units. It involves explicit language instruction at the beginning of lessons, aiming for intentional learning and automatization. Ellis distinguishes TBLT and TSLT based on their theoretical foundations: TBLT views language acquisition as holistic and learner-driven, while TSLT adopts a skill-learning perspective, emphasising the transition from declarative to procedural knowledge (DeKeyser, 1998). He argues that although TBLT and TSLT derive from competing theories, they can complement each other within a modular curriculum. Ellis proposes a model where TBLT is primary, especially for beginners, to build implicit knowledge and communicative confidence. At intermediate and advanced levels, TSLT comes into play to address persistent linguistic issues through explicit instruction, serving a remedial function. He also addresses the importance of instructional context, recognising that teaching approaches must be adaptable to local conditions. Ellis advocates for a balanced approach that combines the universal principles of TBLT with context-sensitive adaptations, rather than replacing TBLT with TSLT, or vice versa.

3 TSLT in a Modular Curriculum for Addressing Persistent Errors?

Ellis' article is a timely and welcome response to criticisms and confusions about TBLT. The quadripartite definition of what a task is has become the gold standard in the field (Bui, *in press*), which helps to distinguish tasks from exercises and regular activities. He further contends that “we should not be purists” (p. 4) by excluding task-like activities, such as story narration tasks or opinion-gap tasks. These activities may have a linguistic outcome and thus might not fully satisfy the task definition proposed by Samuda and Bygate (2008, p. 69). He calls for a more flexible stance here and acknowledges the benefit of a somewhat fuzzy construct for the sake of inclusiveness. This approach not only addresses the issues of what a task must be but also allows flexibility for frontline teachers to adapt their classes into a task-based approach more easily.

The task definition is central to distinguishing between TBLT and TSLT. Ellis identifies two key criteria: the role of tasks in the syllabus and the presence of pre-determined linguistic targets. He advocates for a modular curriculum that incorporates both approaches separately, without attempting to integrate them. Specifically, he argues that:

“The task-based component of the curriculum is also needed at later intermediate and advanced stages but, to address entrenched interlanguage forms, I argue it needs to be supplemented with the structured component (e.g., TSLT) where explicit attention is given to those specific language items that have not been mastered incidentally” (p.9)

This approach, he suggests, can better address the diverse needs of learners and the practical challenges faced by teachers. However, does this imply that TSLT is more effective in facilitating the mastery of grammar, particularly in rectifying persistent errors at post-elementary levels? This argument seems to suggest so, which contradicts the earlier discussion that TBLT is more effective in natural language acquisition. A more coherent and theoretically justified interpretation is needed for the inclusion of TSLT into a TBLT dominant curriculum to address grammar issues.

Ellis justifies the modular curriculum by stating that “the theoretical basis for resorting to explicit teaching is that, without it, certain types of errors will remain entrenched in learners' L2 systems and that this problem may persist but can be addressed by explicit teaching” (p.10). However, I wonder whether there is strong evidence that explicit language instruction, as Ellis describes, would effectively address these linguistic problems in spontaneous L2 communication (e.g., *Mary has left Japan and now live in London). Fossilisation in interlanguage is common in second language learning, especially at intermediate to advanced levels, as Ellis mentions. His proposal seems to advocate for explicit grammar instruction to alert learners to these issues so that they can pay closer attention during L2 use. Research, such as Schmidt's (1990) seminal work, does suggest the importance of consciously noticing forms in the input during second language acquisition. However, this process of consciousness-raising could be achieved through a focus on form (FonF) at any stage of task enactment (Bui, *in press*), including the post-task language focus stage discussed by Skehan (1996) and Willis (1996). In addition, while noticing is necessary, it may not be sufficient for second language acquisition. Such awareness must be coupled with abundant meaningful engagement with the target language. TBLT, unlike TSLT, provides a suitable context and opportunities for all of this to happen. In this sense, although I concur with Ellis that TSLT cannot substitute for TBLT, as they represent fundamentally different approaches, I remain sceptical about the use of TSLT in a modular curriculum to address entrenched errors in learners' interlanguage systems.

Additionally, incorporating two distinct and largely contradictory approaches into a single curriculum may create confusion for teachers during implementation. This is particularly true when it comes to class time allocation between TBLT and TSLT, as well as the increased workload associated with preparation and decision-making. Teachers may find it challenging to determine when to employ each approach effectively, leading to potential inconsistencies in instruction. The lack of clear guidelines on how to

balance these methodologies could result in a fragmented learning experience for students. Moreover, there is a significant risk that, in a modular curriculum, teachers might default entirely to TSLT due to its more “structured” and “convenient” nature. This inclination could stem from the perceived ease of implementing explicit grammar instruction, which may seem less daunting than the more dynamic and fluid tasks characteristic of TBLT. The potential over-reliance on TSLT is certainly not conducive to students’ development of linguistic and communicative competence.

4 The Issue of Assessment in the Modular Curriculum

Another challenge for the proposal of a modular curriculum is determining whether the assessment of student learning should also be two-fold. Specifically, should we assess student learning based on their performance in meaning-focused tasks according to the principles of TBLT, or based on their language accuracy in form-focused assessments according to TSLT? Or should we address both concerns in one assessment task/test? The inherent incompatibility of TBLT and TSLT in L2 assessment would make it difficult to implement a modular curriculum effectively in terms of assessment.

First of all, as Ellis acknowledges, TBLT and TSLT are grounded in different theories of language learning, leading to different types of linguistic knowledge. TBLT focuses on developing implicit knowledge through meaning-focused tasks, which aligns with theories of language acquisition that emphasise the importance of naturalistic, communicative use of language (Krashen, 1982; Long, 1985). In contrast, TSLT emphasises explicit knowledge through form-focused instruction, which aligns with skill-learning theories that stress the importance of proceduralisation and automatising of language forms (DeKeyser, 1998). Assessing students’ performance in a TBLT context would typically involve evaluating their ability to use language communicatively and fluently in real-life tasks (Bui & Huang, 2018), which prioritises meaning over form. On the other hand, assessing students in a TSLT context would involve evaluating their accuracy and mastery of specific language forms, which prioritises form over meaning. The fundamental difference in the learning outcomes of these approaches makes it challenging to design a unified assessment framework that fairly evaluates both types of knowledge. It remains unclear how these distinct theoretical orientations could inform L2 assessment within the same context.

Secondly, in terms of assessment methods, TBLT assessments often involve performance-based tasks, such as problem-solving tasks and project-based assessments, where the focus is on the successful completion of a communicative task (Bui & Tai, 2022; Skehan, 1996, 1998). These assessments are typically holistic and integrated, emphasising the overall communicative competence of the learner. Instead of specific target linguistic items, task performance is often evaluated in terms of overall complexity (syntactic and lexical), accuracy, fluency, and functional adequacy (Bui & Skehan, 2018; Bui & Wong, 2021; Kuiken and Vedder, 2018; Michel, 2017). In contrast, TSLT assessments often involve discrete-point tests, such as grammar quizzes, multiple-choice questions, and fill-in-the-blank exercises, where the focus is on the accurate use of specific language forms. These assessments are typically analytic and segmented, emphasising the learner’s explicit knowledge of language rules. Combining these two assessment methods within a single curriculum could lead to confusion and inconsistency. For instance, a student who performs well in meaning-focused tasks may not necessarily perform well in form-focused assessments, and vice versa. This discrepancy could result in conflicting signals about the student’s overall language proficiency, as well as mixed washback effects on students’ progress.

In addition, implementing a dual assessment system in a modular curriculum poses practical challenges for teachers and learners. Teachers would need to design, administer, and grade two different types of assessments, which could be time-consuming and resource-intensive. Additionally, learners might find it difficult to navigate the different expectations and criteria for success in TBLT and TSLT assessments, leading to potential frustration and disengagement (Lambert, et. al., 2023).

5 Conclusion

Ellis's proposal for a modular curriculum that combines Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Task-Supported Language Teaching (TSLT) is an ambitious and innovative attempt to address the diverse needs of language learners. However, there appears to be a lack of robust theoretical justification for using this modular approach to tackle fossilised linguistic errors through explicit instruction. I argue that "focus on form" (Long, 1985), which is integrated throughout various stages of tasks, along with the "language focus" stage (Willis, 1996) in TBLT, may already effectively address these issues by promoting noticing of linguistic forms within meaningful communication. Additionally, there is a lack of discussion regarding how student learning could be assessed in a dual curriculum that involves both TBLT and TSLT. I highlight several conceptual and practical issues that could pose challenges in fairly evaluating L2 learning progress, stemming from the conflicting educational philosophies of TBLT and TSLT. Nevertheless, Ellis's proposal presents a commendable new approach to implementing a task-based syllabus, trying to address concerns from frontline teachers and allowing for flexibility. Future research should explore these issues further and investigate the long-term impact of Ellis's proposed modular curriculum on second language acquisition.

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