

TBLT from the Teachers' Perspective: A Response to Ellis (2024)

Martin East

The University of Auckland, New Zealand

Received: November 11, 2024/Accepted: November 13, 2024/Published: November 18, 2024

Abstract

In the 'Key Constructs in Language Teaching' article written by Rod Ellis (Ellis, 2024), Rod discusses the modular curriculum concept as a means of accommodating the distinctions between task-based language teaching (TBLT) and task-supported language teaching (TSLT). In this response article, I provide a complementary perspective on how the differences between TBLT and TSLT may be addressed in practice, drawing on and influenced by my work with teachers in my role as a language teacher educator. I start by outlining my association with Rod and his academic work in the context in which we have both worked – New Zealand. I go on to present the central ideas Rod put forward in his article. I then provide my own viewpoint. Finally, I compare our perspectives and draw some conclusions for TBLT in theory and practice.

Keywords

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), task-supported language teaching (TSLT), teachers' perspectives

1 Introduction

The 'Key Constructs in Language Teaching' article written by Rod Ellis (Ellis, 2024) provides a useful and informative exploration of several key issues for the task-based endeavour, particularly regarding the theoretical and practical similarities and differences Rod identified between task-based language teaching (TBLT) and task-supported language teaching (TSLT). Rod does us a great service by clearly articulating what he saw as the distinctions and, more particularly, outlining a way to reconcile the benefits of both approaches. At the end of his article, Rod made the point that he had presented his own ideas about how TBLT and TSLT can work together. He noted that he was offering these ideas to encourage debate about central issues for contemporary language pedagogy.

As someone who has known Rod and been familiar with his work for a good number of years, I was very pleased to accept the invitation from Mark Feng Teng, editor-in-chief of the *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, to write a response to Rod's article (one of several that have been solicited and will appear in the coming months). My purpose in this response article is not to advocate for or against different forms or outworkings of TBLT (i.e., TBLT or TSLT) or the contrasting theories that inform

them. It is, rather, to present the case of what it seems *teachers* say or do regarding their classroom practices, and what I see as the implications of *their* standpoints for the TBLT/TSLT interface.

A question that has intrigued me throughout my years as a teacher educator committed to the TBLT project has been whether, and to what extent, a focus on TBLT as innovation in a teacher education programme makes a difference to teachers' beliefs and practices. During my work with novice teachers, I collected a broad range of data on teachers' reception and enactment of TBLT ideas, whether beginners or more experienced (e.g., [East, 2012](#), [2014a](#), [2014b](#), [2019a](#), [2019b](#), [2022](#)). These data have significantly shaped my understanding of the teachers' perspective on TBLT and what the TBLT/TSLT dichotomy means for real teachers in real classrooms.

In this article, I start by outlining my association with Rod and his academic work in the context in which we have both worked. After this (admittedly somewhat lengthy) background, I go on to present the central ideas Rod put forward in his article. I then provide my own perspective on the TBLT/TSLT distinction and how it might be reconciled. Finally, I draw some conclusions as a contribution to ongoing debate.

2 Background - My Association with Rod Ellis

2.1 Our New Zealand connection

For a good number of years, Rod and I worked at the same university (The University of Auckland in New Zealand). Rod joined the university in the late 1990s and officially retired in 2016. When I joined the academic staff of the Faculty of Education in 2008, Rod was a Professor in the Faculty of Arts and situated in the Department of Applied Language Studies and Linguistics (DALSL), a department he also led during part of his tenure.

Our overlapping association as colleagues within the same institution spans almost a decade. Nonetheless, during that time our paths rarely crossed. The Faculty of Education was housed on its own campus on the outskirts of the central city of Auckland – the village of Epsom. The Faculty of Arts was located on the University's main city campus. The distance between the two campuses was not great (about ten minutes by car), but the separate locations provided a barrier to greater interaction between Epsom-based and city-based colleagues.

By the time I had joined the Faculty of Arts as Professor of Language Education (at the start of 2018), Rod had moved on to a Professorship at Curtin University in Australia (although he has now relocated to New Zealand). I am now currently Head of the School of Cultures, Languages and Linguistics, an amalgamation of three separate departments, including DALSL. Now that I am located on the University's main city campus, the paths Rod and I are on still rarely cross – but they do occasionally, this time at our staff social club.

2.2 Rod's impact in the New Zealand context

Rod is recognised internationally as a leading theorist in the fields of TBLT and second language acquisition (SLA). Rod's work has also had a profound local impact not only on the language teaching context of New Zealand's school system, but also on my own work in that context, by virtue of my role as a language teacher educator.

For ten years (between 2008 and 2017) I worked with students who were preparing to become secondary school teachers of languages other than English in New Zealand. This was a time of significant transformation in New Zealand's schools. Up to that time, language teaching and learning, although definitely aiming to adhere to principles of communicative language teaching (CLT), was largely operationalised in a teacher-led way. Language-specific curriculum guidelines (which operated as default

syllabi) were based on achievement objectives, and suggested the language focus (i.e., grammar) and vocabulary that may be covered at increasing levels of proficiency. Although adherence to the documents was not mandatory, they were drawn on extensively by teachers and their suggestions led in practice to what may be labelled ‘weak CLT’ (Howatt, 1984).

A revised national curriculum for New Zealand’s schools, released in 2007 and mandated from 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2007), challenged teachers, across all curriculum areas, to embrace more constructivist pedagogical practices where learners were to be viewed as active and collaborative partners in their own learning. This shift was aligned with the Māori principle of *ako* – where teachers and students are learning from each other in a way that “affirms the value of the pair and group learning approaches in which students interact with their peers, teacher, tasks, and resources” (Ministry of Education, n.d., para. 2). The shift was concurrently supported by the notion that classroom practices should be founded on genuine social interactions (Ministry of Education, 2011).

Rod’s location in New Zealand at a time of significant curricular change meant that his work became pivotal to enacting the curriculum reforms for languages. Before the reforms were implemented, Rod had published a substantial work on TBLT (Ellis, 2003). When New Zealand’s revised learner-centred curriculum was in the process of development, Rod had been commissioned by our Ministry of Education to prepare a literature review on instructed SLA that might help guide teachers’ decision-making about language pedagogy. Rod proposed ten principles (Ellis, 2005). A subsequent set of six principles addressed the (inter)cultural dimension of language learning (Newton et al., 2010).

2.3 My role as a teacher educator/researcher

As a consequence of the revised curriculum, the language-specific curriculum guidelines were officially withdrawn, effectively replaced by the sets of principles. Against this backdrop, and supported by the notion of *ako* and an emphasis on social interaction, my work as a teacher educator during this time of significant transition was to help beginning teachers to embrace a more open-ended and learner-centred pedagogical approach. In this context, the task construct began to influence thinking and practice among New Zealand’s teachers of languages and Rod’s work (in particular Ellis, 2005) took on particular significance. I drew on the ten principles in my work with teachers, relating the principles to a task-based perspective.

For many teachers, TBLT represented an innovation that challenged the conventional practices articulated in the now withdrawn curriculum statements and that are more strongly associated with approaches like TSLT. This led to several tensions between TBLT in theory and TBLT in practice. In what follows, I outline and then respond to some of the issues Rod raised in Ellis (2024) about the TBLT/TSLT distinction, based on, and influenced by, my work with teachers in classrooms in my role as a language teacher educator.

3 Rod’s Perspective on TBLT and TSLT

3.1 The central task construct

In Ellis (2024), Rod made it clear that the defining feature of a task-based approach is the task itself. Thus, an appreciation of what a task actually is for the purposes of TBLT is crucial to understanding the foundations of TBLT and how TBLT may be put into practice. Rod presented his own four-fold definition of the construct: (1) the primary focus is to be on meaning; (2) there must be some kind of gap; (3) learners should rely on their own resources to complete the task; and (4) there must be some kind of outcome beyond the use of language.

Rod acknowledged, however, that the task construct in practice remains “somewhat fuzzy” (p. 4). On this basis, he suggested that we should not be ‘purists’ in our interpretation and delineation of exactly

what a task is and we should acknowledge “the legitimacy for inclusion in TBLT of any activity that is primarily task-like” (p. 4).

3.2 The TBLT approach

With regard to the broader pedagogical practices in which tasks may be realised in classrooms, Rod’s argument was less fuzzy. Although Rod acknowledged that TBLT is “not monolithic” (p. 5) – that is, it can be practised in a variety of ways – and is to be regarded as an *approach* rather than a narrowly -defined method, he differentiated clearly between two approaches in which tasks play an important role:

task-based (TBLT) and task-supported (TSLT).

For Rod, the crucial point of differentiation between TBLT and TSLT was how attention to grammar would be handled. He asserted that mainstream TBLT theory suggests that the grammar focus is normatively operationalised in TBLT through what Long (e.g., 2000) called ‘focus on form’ (FonF). The principal driver of FonF is what the learners themselves notice and infer about language form as they attempt to communicate. FonF may occur during the task phase (through feedback on learners’ language use during task execution) and/or during the post-task phase (by paying attention to the linguistic problems that have arisen during task performance). In FonF, the grammar is not prescribed and the pre-task phase is not the place where overt attention to form is given. Methodologically, FonF is reflected in an analytic (Type B) syllabus which proposes an inductive approach – in essence, “present the language holistically, and let the learners analyse it for themselves” (East, 2021, p. 76).

FonF differentiates TBLT from a more traditional CLT approach in which a direct and explicit grammar focus – or ‘focus on forms’ (FonFs) (Long, 2000) – will likely occur before any communicative activity has occurred, with that communicative activity contingent on using the grammar that has been taught. This mode of teaching has often been described and realised as Presentation – Practice – Production or PPP: first present the rule, then practise the rule, then produce the rule in some kind of communicative context. FonFs is represented in a synthetic Type A syllabus that presents prescriptively the language and grammar that are to be taught and learned – a deductive approach which, in essence, means “teach the grammar in careful sequences, and let the learners synthesise the parts” (East, 2021, p. 76).

As Rod explained, the two syllabus types find their basis in different theoretical orientations and inform clear distinctions between TBLT and TSLT. TBLT (informed by Type B) is “based on a cognitive view of language acquisition as holistic, gradual and learner determined,” whereas TSLT (informed by Type A) is “based on a skill learning view of language development, where the learning of specific pieces of language proceeds from a declarative to procedural and automatic stages” (p. 7).

3.3 A modular curriculum

Rod’s stance on the clear distinctions between TBLT and TSLT and the incompatibility between them with regard to their theoretical positions raises an important issue – “whether traditional, structural-based teaching has a place in TBLT” (p. 5). Rod maintained that there was a place, and his solution for how that might be addressed was the proposal of a modular curriculum.

The modular curriculum, Rod argued, should not be seen as an integration of the two approaches of TBLT and TSLT – because they are distinct and opposing. Rather, the modular curriculum is designed to accommodate both a task-based component and a structural component – because TBLT and TSLT can be “mutually supporting” (Ellis, 2017, p. 522). In essence, in a modular approach the task focus and the structure focus are operationalised as separate but complementary components in an overarching curriculum. The balance between them may shift as learners progress. Thus, the modular curriculum can be said to capitalise on the benefits of both TBLT and TSLT.

4 My Perspective on TBLT and TSLT

4.1 The central task construct

When it comes to my own take on TBLT and the TBLT/TSLT interface, there is a high level of agreement between Rod's perspectives and my own. In East (2021), I argued that the clear differentiator between TBLT and other approaches was the task itself. I stated:

Whatever else may happen in the task-oriented classroom, the task is crucial. A primary focus on the task is therefore also crucial. If we can get the task right, and have a level of confidence in the task's fit against the theory, we are at least half way towards putting a communicative approach into practice that is 'task-based'. (p. 88)

I also recognised that the boundaries of a task can be somewhat fuzzy. I suggested:

Tasks arguably need to be evaluated on a continuum with 'not task-like' at one end and 'fully task-like' at the other. The evaluative question to be asked is not so much an either/or question – is this a task? Rather, the important question becomes: how task-like is it? (p. 91)

4.2 The TBLT approach

Beyond the task construct, Rod and I also agree that TBLT cannot be taken as a single or monolithic entity. I acknowledge the reality that, above and beyond the task itself, a variety of pedagogical practices, informed by different beliefs and understandings about what is effective pedagogically, may be manifest. For many years this has been seen as a problematic issue for TBLT that has hindered our ability to pinpoint exactly what TBLT is or should be (see, e.g., Hall, 2018; Klapper, 2003; Long, 2016).

Carless (2012) presented a somewhat more optimistic picture of the diversity within TBLT. His perspective was that the different approaches and choices teachers could make was in fact "part of the beauty of TBLT" – although he did acknowledge that this diversity was also "part of its complexity" (p. 4). The particular locus of Carless's work (the Confucian heritage influenced context of Hong Kong) highlights the need for TBLT to come to terms with more teacher-led and structure-based elements, and this is another point of agreement between me and Rod. However, that theorists and researchers have, it seems, not yet come to an agreement on what TBLT is or should be, and that practitioners enact TBLT principles in vastly different ways, means that the situation with regard to TBLT in theory and practice is already somewhat murky – and we would benefit from greater clarity about how the different advantages of, for example, Type A and Type B syllabi or teacher-led and learner-centred may be taken into account.

4.3 Identifying different 'types' of TBLT

Arguably one means out of the mire is to do as Rod has done and apply different labels to discriminate between different forms of teaching where tasks may play a crucial role. Rod is not the only academic to draw such distinctions. Bygate (2016a), for example, spoke of both TBLT and TSLT, differentiating between them in much the same way as Rod. He also outlined what he called *task-referenced* – an approach which "says nothing about how the learning will take place, or how the lessons themselves will be organised," but where tasks become the summative end-goal of the teaching and students are "ultimately tested on target tasks" (p. 387). The use of tasks in the context of teaching and learning is assumed as a washback consequence of this summative task use.

4.4 TBLT as the overarching label

Bygate's (2016a) acknowledgment of different types of TBLT was in the context of an article designed to present directions and developments of TBLT itself. Although there are clear differences in theory and actual practice between different forms of task-oriented pedagogy that I believe would benefit from some level of reconciliation (and the modular curriculum is one way of achieving that), my own position is that *TBLT* should remain the overarching label for approaches where the task construct is central to communicative practice.

At a theoretical level, my own thinking has been influenced in part by ideas that I elsewhere referred to as seminal to conceptualising TBLT in practice (see East, 2024) – Skehan (1996). Skehan's aim was to develop a framework to enhance teachers' understanding of tasks and how they may be sequenced and put into practice to best effect. As a foundation for this practical goal, he drew distinctions between two different versions of TBLT, which he labelled as strong and weak (Table 1). (To be precise, Skehan referred throughout to task-based instruction; it is inferred here that what he described may be called TBLT.)

Table 1

Skehan's Differentiation between Strong and Weak Forms of TBLT

Strong form of TBLT	Weak form of TBLT
Skehan (1996), p. 39	
tasks should be the <i>unit</i> of language teaching, and ... everything else should be subsidiary. In this view, the need to transact tasks is seen as adequate to drive forward language development, as though second language acquisition is the result of the same process of interaction as first language acquisition.	tasks are a vital part of language instruction, but ... they are embedded in a more complex pedagogic context. They are necessary, but may be preceded by focused instruction, and after use, may be followed by focused instruction which is contingent on task performance.

Skehan (1996) went on to note that the weak form of TBLT is “clearly very close to general communicative language teaching” and “could also be compatible with a traditional presentation, practice, production sequence, only with production based on tasks ... rather than more stilted and guided production activities” (p. 39).

At one level, Skehan's (1996) presentation can still be viewed as dichotomous, even though the two versions of practice are described as ‘task-based’. A closer reading reveals that, in fact, Skehan recognised variability of practice within weak and strong. For example, Skehan spoke of different layers of pre-teaching activity, from explicit instruction (teacher-led) – the “most traditional” (p. 54) – to undertaking a pre-task (learner-centred).

Furthermore, dichotomous thinking (Type A versus Type B; teacher-led versus learner-centred; skill learning view versus cognitive view) is not in accord with broader educational theorising that admits more integrated perspectives on practices:

- A more inclusive view on syllabus design is suggested, for example, by Johnson (2009) who challenged the notion that the two syllabus types should be treated “as if they were, and had to be, mutually exclusive.” He suggested, instead, the idea of a syllabus in which “the unit of organisation shifts at different points in the course” (p. 331).
- A more inclusive view on learner-centredness is presented, for example, by Schweisfurth (2013) who argued that actual classroom practices should be seen as on “a continuum from less learner-centred to more learner-centred” (p. 11).

- A more inclusive view on how grammar might be attended to in classrooms is provided, for example, by Loewen (2018) who maintained that FonF and FonFs may be said to characterise “two ends of a continuum which differ in the primary goal of instruction, whether communication or attention to language features.” He went on to acknowledge that “various types of instruction fall along the continuum” (p. 2).

Taking the above arguments into account, in East (2021) I suggested that language pedagogy could be seen as operating on a continuum whose ends represent two contrasting pedagogical stances: “top-down, teacher-led and expository (teach students everything they need to know)” versus “bottom-up, learner-centred and experiential (let students work it all out for themselves)” (p. 8). Long (2015) stated quite forcibly that it would be undesirable for teachers to be at either of these end points, labelling one as “excessively interventionist” and the other as “irresponsibly, wholly non-interventionist” (p. 20). However, Long saw TBLT as a means of accommodating the polarisations. My view is that the continuum concept allows for what Van den Branden et al. (2009) referred to as “gradations of pedagogical choice” rather than two “mutually exclusive extremes” (p. 3). I proposed in East (2021) that TBLT in practice could be located at a range of points on the continuum.

Essentially, I extended the notion of ‘fuzzy’ beyond the task construct and applied it more broadly to TBLT, maintaining that it is arguably not feasible to draw a hard line between the elements that differentiate TBLT from TSLT because the boundaries between them when it comes to classroom practice are too permeable – where, exactly, would you draw the line?

For me, then (and as I have already stated), what differentiates task-based approaches from other forms of language teaching is the task construct itself. This is how I understand Samuda and Bygate (2008) who seemed to suggest that the differentiating elements of TBLT and TSLT are subsidiary to the uniting element of the task. In Rod’s view, Samuda and Bygate’s stance served to “blur the distinction between TBLT and TSLT” because they were “highlighting *instead* the importance of ‘task’ as a construct that can lead to different ways of implementing it” (p. 7, my emphasis). For reasons that I go on to articulate below, this represents the position I hold.

4.5 The risks of dichotomous thinking

I believe there are substantial risks in maintaining dichotomous thinking. Buttler (2020), for example, argued, “[a] binary is often constructed between teacher-centered and student-centered teaching strategies that place traditional teaching behavior in opposition to constructivist teaching behavior” (p. 225). Speculating on this viewpoint, I have argued that this kind of oppositional thinking may function as “a polarising force that attempts to push practitioners into one or the other camp” (East, 2022, p. 53). There is a genuine danger that those in each of the camps “too often talk past one another” (Tobias & Duffy, 2009, p. 6).

Dichotomous thinking takes us back to Samuda and Bygate (2008). Maintaining a segregation between TBLT and TSLT may mean that TSLT ends up being seen as “TBLT ‘lite’” – an inferior form of TBLT that “devalues any use of tasks that falls outside the purview of [strong] TBLT” (p. 219). Those who get placed in the ‘teacher-led’ camp (i.e., TSLT) may find themselves, in perception or actuality, excluded from the ‘learner-centred’ camp that adheres more closely to ‘TBLT proper’.

The risks inherent in polarisation are apposite when we consider the organisations that have been established to provide a home for theorising, research and practice in the TBLT arena. This includes the conferences and events organised by the International Association for Task-Based Language Teaching (IATBLT) – an organisation for which I had the privilege of serving as President for five years – or the Japan-based Task-Based Teaching Special Interest Group (TBL-SIG), hosts of the Task-Based Language Teaching in Asia conferences. That these groups describe themselves as being about TBLT might signal a defined focus that excludes those practices (and teachers) associated with TSLT. Bringing TSLT-oriented

teachers under the broader auspices of TBLT would provide a more inclusive space for reciprocal recognition of different teaching practices, and for mutual dialogue, learning and growth to occur. In this regard, Samuda et al. (2018) referred to the IATBLT as “a *broad* community united by a *broad* interest in tasks in language education, but *neutral* as to how those tasks might be deployed” (p. 1, my emphases). This starting point enables those coming from different positions to explore the potential breadth and flexibility of a pedagogical approach labelled ‘task-based’.

If, for example, the differentiating feature between TBLT and TSLT is reduced to whether or not grammar is taught pre-emptively, a mutual TBLT space (united around the task construct) provides room for those on both sides of the debate to come together to share perspectives. Indeed, Ellis et al. (2019) argued that including explicit pre-task grammar instruction in TBLT is an issue of significance, both theoretically and pedagogically. It is therefore an issue that is worthy of serious consideration among a range of stakeholders who hold different views.

5 What About the Teachers’ Perspective?

Having outlined, from a theoretical standpoint, why I believe TBLT should be the overarching label for pedagogical approaches where the task is central to facilitating communicative activity, in what follows I explore the claim that dichotomous thinking does not capture realistically what teachers actually do in their own classrooms. I begin by drawing briefly on some of the data I have collected over a good number of years to illustrate the viewpoints of those teachers who were introduced to TBLT in their initial teacher education programme.

5.1 What do teachers say about TBLT?

I start by quoting Frank’s position. I have quoted his words extensively in several publications (beginning with East, 2014a), because, in my view, they capture the essence of the conundrum for TBLT in practice.

Frank was among the first to take part in the TBLT-oriented version of the teacher education course I delivered. When Frank had the opportunity to reflect back on what he had learned at the end of his year of initial teacher education, he commented, “[m]y depth of understanding around TBLT has changed.” He went on, “I can now take into my [future] teaching practice much more information regarding the possibilities, shortfalls and benefits of TBLT and make informed judgments about the best way in which to implement it in the classroom” (East, 2014a, p. 270). His viewpoint here suggests that the focus on TBLT in his teacher education had enhanced his knowledge and appreciation of what TBLT was and might look like in actual practice.

Frank was fortunate to secure a position at a local secondary school straight after graduation. Three years later, and still working in the same school, he was asked to reflect back on what he had gained from the TBLT-oriented teacher education he had undergone.

With regard to TBLT he commented, “I mean, let’s be honest, if we weren’t taught [about TBLT], we would all be standing up the front of the classroom doing the PPP. Ignorance is bliss, if we didn’t know about it we wouldn’t do it” (East, 2019b, p. 109). His standpoint here suggests that it is important to make TBLT ideas transparent, and that he still perceived the value of TBLT three years after graduation.

However, Frank went on to reflect, “I currently use TBLT, I also use ‘chalk and talk’, I also use silent reading, I use textbooks, I use the internet, you know – it is one of a suite of tools” (East, 2019b, p. 111). His perspective here suggests that, in actual practice, he picks and chooses between a range of practices and is comfortable to do so.

The tussle between TBLT and more traditional elements was in evidence in the views expressed by other participants. Other comments collected at the end of the one-year programme (recorded in East, 2014a, p. 270) are reproduced in Table 2.

Table 2

Teachers' Perspectives (East, 2014a, p. 270)

Name	Principal language taught	Comment
Sofia	Spanish	“there isn’t only one way of ‘Best Practice’ in the language classroom and we need to experiment with different theories and approaches depending on our learners”
Frédéric	French	“considering using TBLT as a <i>complementary</i> teaching strategy”
Chen	Chinese	“TBLT is incompatible with certain students’ learning style and certain schools’ culture, e.g. students who are deductive-reasoning orientated will prefer to know the rules first”

5.2 What do teachers do with TBLT?

Theorists and researchers may have good reason to draw on arguments and evidence to suggest that learner-centred approaches (such as TBLT and FonF) may be more effective than teacher-led practices to the extent that, as Schweisfurth (2015) put it, “principles of learner-centredness can usefully be invoked.” However, Schweisfurth went on to say that “in *implementation* these will be subject to local variation and will interact with the *existing* pedagogical nexus” (p. 265, my emphases). My analyses of the data presented in Table 2 and other data I have collected led me to the conclusion that “innovations will inevitably become part of a broader package that may well include more traditional components” (East, 2022, p. 47), and that, even in the ostensibly task-based classroom, the pedagogical reality is “eclecticism in practice” (p. 54). This kind of approach is in evidence in other studies (e.g., Andon & Eckerth, 2009; Zheng & Borg, 2014). The explicit and direct teaching of grammar is a case in point.

Regarding grammar, it has been asserted (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2015; Savignon, 2018) that, despite arguments or research findings that point to the efficacy of an inductive approach, teachers often continue to adhere to traditional top-down, teacher-led, rule-based methods that focus on accuracy and draw on grammar practice exercises to solidify learning. On this basis, it is not unreasonable to infer that even teachers who describe themselves as ‘task-based’ may, at least on occasions, revert to direct pre-task grammar instruction (see, e.g., Van de Guchte et al., 2019).

Furthermore, when it comes to pedagogical decision-making, teachers are “individuals with their own ... individual differences, beliefs, and characteristics” (Griffiths, 2012, p. 475). Teachers’ own specific classroom choices are influenced by a range of complex and interacting factors (Borg, 2015). A persistent classroom reality is that teachers often make their own independent decisions about classroom practices, consciously or unconsciously, and often in the context of what they are faced with at a particular point in time (Mitchell et al., 2019).

With regard to the syllabus underpinning teachers’ work (B or A) or the perceived approach to teachers’ work (TBLT or TSLT), the distinctions in practice may become irrelevant. As I argued in East (2021), teachers often deviate from a prescribed syllabus as they mediate its requirements in response to what is happening in their own classrooms. This accords with an important assertion Rod made. In Ellis (2024), he wrote “there must be and indeed always will be room for teachers to make both offline and online decisions about how to implement any approach” (p. 9). As Ellis et al. (2019) stated, the syllabus “should not function to *dictate* the procedures used in the classroom, but ... [rather] should provide teachers with *resources and freedom* to address the needs of learners differing in motivation and aptitudes as well as fluctuations in classroom dynamics” (p. 207, my emphases).

As regards the theories that inform pedagogical approaches and decisions (e.g., “cognitive view of language acquisition” versus “skill learning view of language development” – Ellis, 2024, p. 7), it seems that many teachers (for example, when planning their lessons) are not necessarily that interested

in engaging with theoretical arguments or research findings (Connolly, 2022). In some cases, they may find these arguments or findings overwhelming or contradictory. This leads many teachers to “go with their own instincts regarding what works, what gets a good reaction, and what engages learners, rather than selecting a methodology based on research and sound teaching principles” (Brereton, in Thomas & Brereton, 2019, p. 278).

Taking the data from my own studies and the arguments from the literature into account, acknowledging a flexible continuum of practices would seem to be the most logical conclusion. In practice:

Teachers will place themselves at different points on the continuum for a range of reasons. Additionally, teachers’ positioning on the continuum is not static but fluid, and teachers may move to other points, in different contexts and at different times, and with different classes and different learners. (East, 2021, p. 185)

I went on to say that, when viewed as a continuum, “the distinctions within TBLT are more nuanced than specific labels might suggest” (East, 2021, p. 185). Consequently, attempting to consign teachers to different boxes (TBLT or TSLT) based on (for example) whether they are subject to a particular syllabus or whether or not they have pre-taught (and subsequently wish to see practised) an element of grammar seems like an unnecessary distraction – especially when teachers do not necessarily make pedagogical decisions based on conscious or deliberate application of particular theoretical frameworks.

6 Limitations of the Continuum Proposal

A key limitation of my proposal is that it may be seen to validate overt FonFs at the expense of FonF. Van den Branden et al. (2009) conceded the reality that, globally, “the language education that can be observed will show a mixture of holistic and analytic aspects, teacher-centered stages and learner-driven moments, communication focus and form focus” (p. 3). They acknowledged nonetheless that TBLT itself is “systematically conceptualized along holistic, meaning-focused, learner-driven lines” (p. 5). Although a narrower understanding of TBLT (i.e., *isolating* TBLT and its implementation at the learner-centred end of the continuum) may well exclude or fail to take into account a wider range of actual practices, the broader continuum concept potentially undermines TBLT’s learner-centred orientation by allowing too much room for traditional teacher-led practices.

In turn, subsuming practices associated with FonFs under the broader heading of TBLT might risk obscuring the meaning or communication focus of lessons to the extent that what is going on loses any semblance of being ‘task-based’ (i.e., teachers’ practices veering strongly towards the teacher-led end of the continuum and ‘tasks’ being nothing more than opportunities to use the pre-taught grammar in a communicative guise – a return to PPP and weak CLT).

Another limitation takes us back to my earlier assertion that the concept of TBLT is already quite murky due to a range of interpretations of what TBLT actually is. It might be claimed that the continuum proposal maintains the murkiness because it is too accommodating of theoretically incompatible elements.

Taking the above limitations into account, I am not proposing practices where tasks end up becoming “an adjunct to structure-based teaching” (Skehan, 2003, p. 1), as might be the case in some forms of TSLT, but, rather, practices where tasks are maintained as “vital” and “necessary” (Skehan, 1996, p. 39), albeit supported by some teacher-led components. However, the limitations of the continuum proposal highlight one strength of the modular curriculum – that it might enable teachers to focus on forms where appropriate, without losing sight of the importance of encouraging a focus on meaning through tasks. This is because the modular curriculum makes clear that there are two distinct foci.

7 Summary and Conclusion

Ultimately, my aim in this response article has been to draw attention to the teachers' perspective, to consider what it seems that teachers say about their practices or choose to do in their classrooms, and to outline what I see as the implications of their thoughts and actions for making a distinction between TBLT and TSLT.

For Rod, direct teaching of forms (in particular pre-task) constitutes the essential difference in theory and practice between TBLT and TSLT, and the way to account for a structure-based element alongside a task-based component is to create a modular curriculum that enables 'the best of both worlds' whilst still maintaining the distinction between those two worlds. Rod's notion of a modular curriculum certainly resonates with me as one way forward for classroom work that should be seriously considered. My alternative proposal is to acknowledge actual classroom practices under an overarching task-based label with a view to including the potential benefits of both teacher-led and learner-centred elements – subsuming everything within one world. My viewpoint is that what differentiates TBLT from other pedagogical approaches is the task itself, rather than the pedagogical practices that may accompany it at different stages in a task-based lesson.

As regards what surrounds the task – that is, what goes on before, during and after task performance – my experiences of working with and collecting data direct from teachers as well as my reading of the education literature suggest a continuum of practice with a fluidity that enables teachers to move between teacher-led and learner-centred for a range of reasons and at their own discretion as they respond to classroom realities. The continuum proposal is arguably not incompatible with Rod's modular proposal in that the modular curriculum could be operationalised in the context of a fluid continuum of practice.

I conclude that when teachers are genuinely wishing to enact task-based principles, however tentatively or faultily, I would rather see their practices, even if at times teacher-led, subsumed under the broader and more inclusive title of TBLT, thereby enabling them to avoid being compartmentalised as adherents to either TBLT or TSLT. My proposal for inclusion is based on the belief that TBLT can be a broad enough church to accommodate a comprehensive range of perspectives on pedagogical practice – with the task as its unifying feature. To adapt Rod's own words (as referred to earlier), perhaps we should not be purists and acknowledge the legitimacy for inclusion in TBLT of any teaching/learning activity that ultimately supports the primary goals of task execution and task completion. Nevertheless, ongoing debates about exactly what TBLT is, or should be, or should become in the instructed context must also include challenging those teachers who claim or wish to be task-based when aspects of their practices potentially undermine the efficacy of learner-centred, experiential tasks.

Coming back to the New Zealand context with which I began this response article, Rod made the point in Ellis (2005) that the conclusions he drew from his review of the literature were not designed to "prescribe or proscribe what teachers should do to ensure effective learning in their classrooms" but, rather, to "stimulate reflection on the complex phenomenon of instructed language learning and a willingness to experiment with new approaches in accordance with their local conditions" (p. 44). These assertions were certainly principles I underscored with my own students in the process of focusing on TBLT. That is, I made it clear that I did not wish to tell my students how to teach or limit what they might do in their own classrooms, but I did wish to encourage them to try out the new ideas we were exploring together. Frank's case (see earlier) exemplifies these principles in action.

When it comes to the teachers' perspective, I believe we need to find the balance between trusting teachers to know their own classes and their own students, and therefore to choose what they see as appropriate procedures for the context, and encouraging teachers to experiment with alternative approaches. In my view, an overarching TBLT label provides room for us to do that. It also requires a *bidirectional* dialogue:

- On the one hand, TBLT must be open to shape and evolve itself in light of what teachers *actually do*. As Rose (2019) argued, “theory development that revolves around teaching practices needs to involve teachers; and better still, be informed by teaching practices” (p. 898). Bygate (2016b) asserted, “engaging our theories with the realities of real world practice is the one thing that can genuinely inform – and enable us to refine, change or indeed if necessary abandon – our theories” (p. 12).
- On the other hand, teachers need to be open to *modify* their practices in light of our current understanding of what TBLT encourages as effective. As Widdowson (1992) once expressed it, “there must always be the possibility of change” (p. 271). Those teachers who wish to pursue a pedagogical agenda that includes tasks need to be reminded (and to remind themselves) of the centrality of the task construct to any approach that is being referred to as task-based, with all this implies for learner-centredness and experiential learning in at least the task phase of the lesson.

In conclusion, I am mindful of an argument presented by Mike Long, who may perhaps be described as among the TBLT purists, although I would not wish to pigeon-hole him since, sadly, he no longer has the ability to reply directly. He maintained, “[n]o approach to LT [language teaching] has proven ‘correct’ to date, and there should be no illusion as to TBLT’s chances of breaking the tradition. Real issues remain” (Long, 2016, p. 28). I think that the place, role and timing of explicit grammar instruction are among such real issues and that Mitchell’s assertion, made many years ago now, remains true today: in TBLT “much remains to be done before the most ‘effective’ mixes and sequences of instruction and use can be identified” (Mitchell, 2000, p. 296). Perhaps, when Rod and I see each other again at our staff social club, we can discuss these and other issues over a beer (which seems to be Rod’s tippie) or wine (which is definitely mine).

References

- Andon, N., & Eckerth, J. (2009). Chacun à son goût? Task-based L2 pedagogy from the teacher’s point of view. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 19(3), 286-310.
- Borg, S. (2015). *Teacher cognition and language education: Research and practice*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Buttler, T. (2020). Disrupting my teaching practices: A teacher educator living as a contradiction. *Studying Teacher Education*, 16(2), 222-239.
- Bygate, M. (2016a). Sources, developments and directions of task-based language teaching. *The Language Learning Journal*, 44(4), 381-400.
- Bygate, M. (2016b). TBLT through the lens of applied linguistics: Engaging with the real world of the classroom. *ITL International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 167(1), 3-15.
- Carless, D. (2012). Task-based language teaching in Confucian-heritage settings: Prospects and challenges. *On Task*, 2(1), 4-8.
- Connolly, D. (2022). Practitioners respond to Freda Mishan’s ‘The Global ELT coursebook: A case of Cinderella’s slipper?’ *Language Teaching*, 55(2), 284-287.
- East, M. (2012). *Task-based language teaching from the teachers’ perspective: Insights from New Zealand*. John Benjamins.
- East, M. (2014a). Encouraging innovation in a modern foreign language initial teacher education programme: What do beginning teachers make of task-based language teaching? *The Language Learning Journal*, 42(3), 261-274.
- East, M. (2014b). Mediating pedagogical innovation via reflective practice: A comparison of pre-service and in-service teachers’ experiences. *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 15(5), 686-699.

- East, M. (2019a). Embedding innovation into school modern foreign languages programmes: Outcomes of two teachers' inquiries into their own practices. *The European Journal of Applied Linguistics and TEFL*, 8(2), 141-157.
- East, M. (2019b). Sustaining innovation in school modern foreign languages programmes: Teachers' reflections on task-based language teaching three years after initial teacher education. *The Language Learning Journal*, 47(1), 105-115.
- East, M. (2021). *Foundational principles of task-based language teaching*. Routledge.
- East, M. (2022). *Mediating innovation through language teacher education*. Cambridge University Press.
- East, M. (2024). Martin East's essential bookshelf: Task-based language teaching. *Language Teaching*, 57(3), 408-418.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language teaching and learning*. Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2005). *Instructed second language acquisition: A literature review*. Ministry of Education.
- Ellis, R. (2017). Position paper: Moving task-based language teaching forward. *Language Teaching*, 50(4), 507-526.
- Ellis, R. (2024). Task-based and task-supported language teaching. *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, 6(4), 1-13.
- Ellis, R., Skehan, P., Li, S., Shintani, N., & Lambert, C. (2019). *Task-based language teaching: Theory and practice*. Cambridge University Press.
- Griffiths, C. (2012). Focus on the teacher. *ELT Journal*, 66(4), 468-476.
- Hall, G. (2018). *Exploring English language teaching: Language in action* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Howatt, A. P. R. (1984). *A history of English language teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, K. (2009). Foreign language syllabus design. In K. Knapp & B. Seidlhofer (Eds.), *Handbook of foreign language communication and learning* (pp. 309-340). De Gruyter.
- Klapper, J. (2003). Taking communication to task? A critical review of recent trends in language teaching. *The Language Learning Journal*, 27, 33-42.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2015). Research into practice: Grammar learning and teaching. *Language Teaching*, 48(2), 263-280.
- Loewen, S. (2018). Focus on form versus focus on forms. In J. I. Lontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching* (pp. 1-6). John Wiley and Sons.
- Long, M. (2000). Focus on form in task-based language teaching. In R. D. Lambert & E. Shohamy (Eds.), *Language policy and pedagogy: Essays in honor of A. Ronald Walton* (pp. 179-192). John Benjamins.
- Long, M. (2015). TBLT: Building the road as we travel. In M. Bygate (Ed.), *Domains and directions in the development of TBLT: A decade of plenaries from the international conference* (pp. 1-26). John Benjamins.
- Long, M. (2016). In defense of tasks and TBLT: Nonissues and real issues. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 36, 5-33.
- Ministry of Education. (n.d.). *The concept of ako*. <https://tereomaori.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-guidelines/Teaching-and-learning-te-reo-Maori/Aspects-of-planning/The-concept-of-ako>
- Ministry of Education. (2007). *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education (2011). *Genuine social interactions*. <http://seniorsecondary.tki.org.nz/Learning-languages/Pedagogy/Social-interactions>
- Mitchell, R. (2000). Applied linguistics and evidence-based classroom practice: The case of foreign language grammar pedagogy. *Applied Linguistics*, 21(3), 281-303.

- Mitchell, R., Myles, F., & Marsden, E. (2019). *Second language learning theories* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Newton, J., Yates, E., Shearn, S., & Nowitzki, W. (2010). *Intercultural Communicative Language Teaching: Implications for effective teaching and learning - a literature review and an evidence-based framework for effective teaching*. Ministry of Education.
- Rose, H. (2019). Dismantling the ivory tower in TESOL: A renewed call for teaching-informed research. *TESOL Quarterly*, 53(3), 895-905.
- Samuda, V., Bygate, B., & Van den Branden, K. (2018). Towards a researched pedagogy for TBLT. In V. Samuda, K. Van den Branden, & M. Bygate (Eds.), *TBLT as a researched pedagogy* (pp. 1-22). John Benjamins.
- Samuda, V., & Bygate, M. (2008). *Tasks in second language learning*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Savignon, S. (2018). Communicative competence. In J. I. Lontas (Ed.), *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching* (pp. 1-7).
- Schweisfurth, M. (2013). *Learner-centred education in international perspective: Whose pedagogy for whose development?* Routledge.
- Schweisfurth, M. (2015). Learner-centred pedagogy: Towards a post-2015 agenda for teaching and learning. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 40, 259-266.
- Skehan, P. (1996). A framework for the implementation of task-based instruction. *Applied Linguistics*, 17(1), 38-61.
- Skehan, P. (2003). Task-based instruction. *Language Teaching*, 36(1), 1-14.
- Thomas, N., & Brereton, P. (2019). Practitioners respond to Michael Swan's 'Applied Linguistics: A consumer's view'. *Language Teaching*, 52(2), 275-278.
- Ministry of Education (2011). *Genuine social interactions*. <http://seniorsecondary.tki.org.nz/Learning-languages/Pedagogy/Social-interactions>
- Tobias, S., & Duffy, T. (Eds.). (2009). *Constructivist instruction: Success or failure?* Routledge.
- Van de Guchte, M., Rijlaarsdam, G., Braaksma, M., & Bimmel, P. (2019). Focus on language versus content in the pre-task: Effects of guided peer-video model observations on task performance. *Language Teaching Research*, 23(3), 310-329.
- Van den Branden, K., Bygate, M., & Norris, J. (2009). Task-based language teaching: Introducing the reader. In K. Van den Branden, M. Bygate, & J. Norris (Eds.), *Task-based language teaching: A reader* (pp. 1-13). John Benjamins.
- Widdowson, H. G. (1992). Innovation in teacher development. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 13, 260-275.
- Zheng, X., & Borg, S. (2014). Task-based learning and teaching in China: Secondary school teachers' beliefs and practices. *Language Teaching Research*, 18(2), 205-221.

Martin East is currently Professor of Language Education at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. He is the author of numerous publications in the fields of language pedagogy and language assessment. Drawing on his years of experience as a language teacher and teacher educator, his recently published book *Foundational Principles of Task-Based Language Teaching* (2021, Routledge, Open Access) outlines, in an accessible and reader-friendly way, the core theories that inform, and the central practices that make up, TBLT. The book expands considerably on the proposals made in the present article. Martin is past president of the International Association for Task-based Language Teaching.