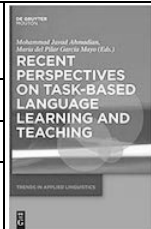


Recent Perspectives on Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching

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Recent Perspectives on Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching		
Authors:	Mohammad Javad Ahmadian & María del Pilar García Mayo (Eds.) (2017)	
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Recent Perspectives on Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching, edited by Mohammad Javad Ahmadian and María del Pilar García Mayo, is a twelve-chapter book on the most recent trends in Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) that addresses strengths and weaknesses in the TBLT literature and provides suggestions for how extant gaps should be filled.

The foreword, written by Ali Shehadeh, delineates the paramount importance of TBLT by mentioning its relevance to the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and the plethora of recent publications, conferences, and symposiums dedicated to the topic (p. vii). Shehadeh further points to the recent expansion of the literature on TBLT by covering three main themes, namely: TBLT in foreign contexts, TBLT and L2 writing, and TBLT and technology. He suggests that, up until now, the greatest proportion of research has focused on TBLT in second language contexts, but today the focus is shifting towards foreign language contexts. Likewise, the following areas have been neglected by scholars: a) TBLT and learner-centered instruction; b) TBLT and languages other than English; c) TBLT and English for Specific Purposes; and d) TBLT and Content-Based Instruction (CBI). Therefore, the aim of this foreword is to pave the ground for research into these under-represented areas of TBLT (p. viii).

In the introduction to the book, Ahmadian and García Mayo posit that their motivation to write the present book was to integrate the epistemological multiplicity of TBLT and SLA by pinning together the theoretical foundations of cognitive-interactionist theory, socio-cultural theory, complexity theory, and pedagogical perspectives. As a result, the book has been divided into four major parts covering these four perspectives and their pertinent theoretical and empirical underpinnings.

Section 1 is dedicated to the cognitive-interactionist theory as a theoretical framework for TBLT research. As Ahmadian suggests, the cognitive-interactionist perspective is one of the most prolific frameworks in TBLT. However, the following are but only a few of the lacunae that exist in this perspective:

- a.) the effects of task manipulation on cognitive mechanisms, SLA, and production;
- b.) the design and implementation of tasks to meet the diverse cognitive capacities of different learners; and
- c.) the affordances offered and the constraints caused by the implementation of task-supported curricula in different parts of the world.

Sections 2 and 3 cover TBLT studies related to sociocultural theory and complexity theory, respectively. These two perspectives have opened up new avenues of research in the field of SLA; however, studies from such perspectives are few in TBLT. With regard to the relevance of section 4, that is, the pedagogical perspectives to TBLT research, the authors claim that, due to the context-sensitivity of both TBLT in general and tasks in particular, studies in different parts of the world may yield different results. Therefore, studies conducted in different geographical contexts have to be seriously taken into account to give us a clearer picture of TBLT practices. As a result, the last three studies in section 4 (Chapters 10, 11, and 12) are in congruence with the pedagogical perspective and they explore task design and implementation in the contexts of New Zealand, Germany, and Vietnam respectively.

Section 1, Chapter 1, which is supported by the cognitive-interactionist theory, contains a recent empirical study by prominent scholars, García Mayo, Agirre, and Azkarai. It investigates the extent to which two types of task repetition, same task repetition and procedural repetition, influence complexity, accuracy, and fluency in the oral production of young Spanish EFL learners. The findings reveal that procedural task repetition positively impacted the participants' fluency and accuracy. Additionally, it is indicated that task completion in itself can contribute to measures of fluency and accuracy. This study has added to the body of knowledge in TBLT with regard to the impact of task repetition on the oral production of foreign language learners. Also, the large sample and the younger participants of this study are what distinguish it from previous ones.

In Chapter 2, Wen integrates research on formulaic sequences in SLA and cognitive aptitude factors of working memory (WM) into L2 task planning and performance research. He explores the possible main and interaction effects between learners' WM (operationalized as consisting of phonological WM and executive WM), and pre-task planning on the formulaic sequences produced while narrating tasks in an L2. In line with the results of his study, which show the paramount importance of fixed phrases (formulaic sequences) in task performance, he proposes that formulaic sequences have the potential to be integrated into the traditional variables of complexity, accuracy, fluency, and lexis as measures of task performance. Moreover, Wen argues that apart from learning vocabulary and grammar, which are inseparable parts of every curriculum, it would be beneficial for the learners to be taught phrasal knowledge. The rationale behind the significance of such fixed phrases in production and task performance is that such structures are stored and retrieved holistically, hence contributing to their processing both for native and non-native speakers (Wray & Perkins, 2000).

Chapter 3 contains a study by Gurzynski-Weiss, Henderson, and Jung which explores the timing and type of learner modified output in relation to correct perception of feedback in face-to-face and synchronous task-based chat. The findings substantiate the results of previous studies by revealing that learners' immediate output modification strongly correlates with their correct noticing of feedback. In other words, when learners are required to produce immediate partial modified output, they would be more likely to notice feedback, as compared to when

they are not required to produce modified output. Interestingly, the relationship between immediate production of modified output and noticing of feedback was more robust in chat rather than face-to-face interactions.

Section two encompasses three chapters (4, 5, and 6) which look at TBLT from the lens of sociocultural theory. Ahmadian and Garcia Mayo contend that tasks require learners to resort to their cognitive and linguistic resources for the sake of mediation, appropriation, and internalization—a belief that elucidates the link between sociocultural theory and TBLT (p. 4). van Compernelle (Chapter 4) postulates that, from a Vygotskian standpoint, form and meaning are indivisible; hence, antithetical to the common approaches used in the literature, he has adopted an approach to TBLT called “dynamic strategic interaction scenarios,” which revolves around engaging learners’ overt focus on form and meaning synchronously (van Compernelle, 2013, 2014a, 2014b). He draws from Vygotsky’s ideas of Strategic Interaction Scenarios and Dynamic Assessment that would consolidate form-meaning mappings in learners’ interlanguage and raise their consciousness of L2 knowledge during online production. Again, from a Vygotskian perspective, Payant, in Chapter 5, outlines the effects of L3 learner proficiency and task types on language mediation. Williams (Chapter 6) investigates the adoption of CBI into a TBLT framework in the context of a French curriculum. In this chapter, he propounds that CBI can inform and augment TBLT by offering opportunities for the stages in tasks which lack language focus or focus on linguistic elements, particularly when it comes to difficult grammatical points or sociolinguistic/pragmatic aspects of language. For instance, this focus on language elements, while performing a task, can be directed by a feature typical of CBI (e.g. verbalization).

Section three of the book contains Chapters 7, 8, and 9 and draws on the complexity theory framework. By defining tasks as fertile grounds for the integration of social, cognitive, and professional aspects of second/foreign language learning, Bygate (Chapter 7) argues that tasks are excellent contexts for the development of learner autonomy, an argument that is in line with a dynamic system view of language which underscores learner autonomy. Chapter 8, an empirical study conducted by Larsen-freeman and Nguyen, brings into light L2 learners’ inter-individual and intra-individual variations of performance on the acquisition of 30 English formulaic sequences by using tasks in the context of the classroom. While Wen’s study in Chapter 2 showed the significance of formulaic sequences in task performance, the pretest, posttest, and delayed posttest of this study done by Larsen-freeman and Nguyen demonstrated that TBLT is not only useful for teaching grammatical and lexical features, but also for teaching formulaic sequences, an under-represented linguistic form. By looking at TBLT from an ecological viewpoint in Chapter 9, Kramsch and Narcy-Combes suggest that empathy has to be incorporated into TBLT. Learners’ personalities and identities have to be respected, and their needs and aims should be taken into account.

Section four contains the last three chapters (10, 11, and 12), which delve into TBLT from a pedagogical and educational perspective. For example, East (Chapter 10) pinpoints the relationship between tasks and explicit grammar teaching by comparing the strong form of TBLT, which is a ‘zero grammar’ approach, with weaker versions of TBLT, describing focus on form, focus on forms, and focus on meaning. Due to teachers’ lack of understanding with tasks, the study conducted by Müller-Hartmann and Schocker in Chapter 11 argues that long-term teacher training programs that promote teachers’ reflective ability are more facilitative than one-shot in-service training sessions that focus on theoretical input. Finally, Chapter 12

written by Newton and Bui, revolves around a study conducted in the context of Vietnam in which the researchers evaluated the principles of a newly-developed curriculum against the established principles of TBLT.

Recent Perspectives on Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching can be of great use both for experienced researchers who are interested in TBLT and novice researchers who are looking for avenues of research in this area of inquiry. Additionally, its theme-based, clear-cut design provides readers with a clear grasp of research in TBLT. Yet, the present edited volume has incorporated a number of perspectives in TBLT, which is disfavored by prominent scholars in the field and considered as “theoretical disunity” (Long, 2015). Therefore, the book might attract some critical voices in line with Long’s (2015) support for theoretical pluralism rather than theory proliferation, which he deems to be unsound in any field of study.

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