

The Relationship between PPP and TBLT: Reference to a Specific Task and Ways of Assessment

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Introduction

Modern English language teaching could be characterized as more liberal, regarding the adoption of particular approaches and methods for second language acquisition. This tendency is evident in the collaborative character of the learning practice, where learners and teachers try to explore the second language together for the sake of its acquisition (Allwright & Hanks, 2009). The shift towards the non-implementation of methodologies is noticed even in the more conservative circles, since the application of specific methodologies is restricted at certain learners with certain learning characteristics (Swan, 2005). Nevertheless, there can be a discussion about the current debate between Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) and the PPP (presentation-practice-production) approach.

During the last 20 years, TBLT is found among the most interesting areas of second language acquisition to investigate. The development of TBLT was gradual, until it took its recent form. Long and Norris (2001) refer to that, mentioning that the approach was given a name and acquired its basic principles, in a period when it was commencing a tendency to react to form-based approaches, where the teacher was the dominant figure in a class. In reality, the emerging approach provided value to previous practices and did not reject them (Nunan, 1989).

The stimuli for the development of TBLT as a learning and teaching approach could be attributed to the ineffectiveness of traditional approaches and to the relevant notion of language teaching to general education. For the purposes of this study, it will be attempted to investigate the features of TBLT and the PPP approach separately, in order to reach an examination of their relationship. Since it is claimed that these two approaches lie at opposing ends regarding communicative language learning and teaching, it will be examined how and why the limitations of PPP find a response at TBLT. The definition of the word 'task' is essential to our understanding of the concepts around TBLT.

Moreover, a specific task will be chosen, in order to perceive at a better extent the theory behind TBLT. Finally, our focus will be centred on the possible ways of assessing students after they had completed the previously mentioned selected task.

Relationship between Form-Based and Meaning-Based Approaches

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) or the Communicative Approach can be characterized as an approach to teaching rather than a method, which encompasses five distinct principles according to Nunan (1991). Teaching in CLT emphasizes the necessity to learn to communicate through interaction, the use of authentic materials, the focus on language along with the learning process, the enrichment of learners' personal experiences and a combination of language learning and activities outside the classroom (Nunan, 1991). Since CLT is a broad approach of language learning, it is expected that within the approach there will exist differences which, in our case (CLT), create extremes concerning the center of teaching focus.

Particularly, in the CLT continuum it is observed that the focus of teaching is either on form or on meaning. On the one hand, there are more form-based approaches, where language is presented in separate linguistic items. From this aspect, which draws the attention to accuracy, non-communicative learning or pre-communicative language practice is emphasized with the use of exercises and enabling tasks (Littlewood, 2004). This kind of approach constitutes a weak form of CLT with the teaching process being centered on language features and not the exchange of information. An example of a form-based approach is the PPP cycle (Presentation- Practice- Production).

In the first phase of presentation, a new grammar feature is presented and the teacher explains the new structure while checking the learners' comprehension on the new material. Afterwards, the learners practice the new language feature through exercises and drills, in order to, finally, produce the new structure in a different context, using information they created by themselves (Richards, 2006). The PPP approach was broadly used in language teaching and is still adopted by teachers and coursebooks, after some adjustments, because it offers a clearly structured plan for the lesson.

Limitations of Form-Based Approaches

However, PPP approach has been criticized by many academics from 1990's and onwards. Teachers claim that the approach does not meet the suggested standards of effectiveness (Lindsay & Knight, 2006). Other studies confirm that belief by admitting that PPP does not manage to handle language basically as a means for communication (Ellis, 2003), therefore learners are interested for correctness in grammatical forms rather than meaning during the production phase (Willis & Willis, 2009). According to a recent study, this approach is based on a simplistic view of language learning even though language learning involves more than an automatized practice (Kostoulas, 2012). The result of automatization and learning through focus on form is no longer credible in linguistics and psychology (Skehan, 1996).

In Kostoulas (2012) analysis it is supported that "learners who do well in the practice phase fail to transfer this ability to the production phase, and –even if they do successfully manage the production phase– they often fail to transfer this ability outside the classroom" (p.2). Finally, we can trace some interesting findings in Vystavělová's (2009) Thesis that concern limitations of PPP approach. The researcher presented that learners were passive for the largest part of the lesson, which means that lessons were teacher-centered (Vystavělová, 2009); a framework that does not fit with humanistic learner-centeredness (Harmer, 2007). Among the last findings in Vystavělová's study, we can note the negative effect of the lesson's predictability and the unsuitability of the approach for adult learners who need more independent communication (2009).

TBLT Is the Response

Influenced by the CLT theory, the grammar focus, and generally the form focus of PPP has been replaced with a more functional way of teaching, and at the same time the type of activities turned the attention away from accuracy and closer to fluency. This change brought in the surface a "fluency-first" pedagogy (Brumfit, 1984), where grammar instruction is determined by the students' performance on fluency tasks rather than the syllabus. This pedagogy was a compass for more meaning-based approaches that focus on fluency, where learners are expected to develop a language system through attempts to use the language. In meaning-based approaches the teacher's role is more limited in providing opportunities for activities that reinforce communication.

Specifically, in the continuum of CLT they represent teaching based on structured or authentic communication (Littlewood, 2004). The emphasis is on communication of meanings with complex activities and structured tasks or in its extreme with larger and more complicated tasks that demand language discussion and problem-solving techniques (Littlewood, 2004). A model of meaning-based approach is TBLT, which is characterized as the strong form of CLT (Ellis, 2003).

Basis of TBLT

TBLT is an approach to language teaching that can be manipulated and adapted by teachers in terms of the characteristics and the needs of the learners. In the particular approach, tasks constitute the central mean of instruction, since they determine the classroom activities, the curriculum and the syllabus and the ways of assessment (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). According to TBLT theory, three basic notions, the task elements, the task structure and the task features, form a task. Since this essay needs to draw a lot of attention on TBLT, following, we will emphasize on the basic features of the approach.

The task elements include the goals, the input data, the activities or procedures, the roles and the settings (Nunan, 2004). The goals of a learning task are related not only to specific domains of language use, such as the academic, the professional, the social and the commercial skills but to other aspects of learning process. For that reason the goals can be classified into socio-cultural, process-oriented or cultural and communicative (Clark, 1987). Input data refers to verbal materials, such as spoken or written language or non-verbal materials, such as diagrams, maps, pictures, charts that learners are faced with at the beginning of their task.

Their difficulty depends on the text genre and the text structure, but generally input data should be appropriate for the characteristics of the learners in order to be able to complete the task (Hover, 1986). Activities or procedures are the actual task learners have to engage with. Some significant aspects of them include the distribution of information, the importance of information exchange and the focus of the task's interaction. The activities are classified according to three basic activity types which include information gap, reasoning gap and opinion gap activities (Prabhu, 1987).

As far as the roles are concerned, teachers operate in the background while they have to take two core actions, motivate the language learners and support them with planned or unplanned interventions (Van den Branden, 2006). Learners take the control of the task, since they are responsible for the negotiation of meaning, which may mean correcting each other (Sharma, 2011).

Setting refers to teacher and student ratio and physical environment. It is evident from research results of classroom settings that there are some mixed findings with some researchers believe in the effectiveness of group work during a task (Anderson & Lynch, 1988) whereas others support the usefulness of individual work (Li & Adamson, 1992).

An additional characteristic of a task is the task structure, which includes the pre-task phase, the task cycle and the post-task (Bruton, 2005). Commencing with the pre-task phase the teacher introduces the topic and the task to the learners, so that the next stage, the task cycle, will become comprehensible and learners will feel more confident to complete it (Willis, 1996). In the task cycle stage, that constitutes the actual task, students carry out the task, they plan how to report on the task outcome and they finally report the task back to the class. What follows is language focus, where the analysis of the language and more practice on it are taking place by reviewing and repeating the task (Willis, 1996).

The final post-task phase consists of all the other activities that should be completed by the end of the actual task, such as the planning, the report and the language focus. The last element of a task according to TBLT theory refers to the task features that describe the attributes that need to exist for a task to be considered applicable and purposeful. A task should be a 'workplan' that pays attention to meaning rather than form and comprises real processes of language use where any of the four language skills (listening, speaking, writing, reading) can be involved (Ellis, 2003). In a task the communicative outcome holds a very important position, as efficiency has priority over correctness.

Additionally, the emphasis in creation rather than reproduction allows many times classroom and group work, so that the students can exchange opinions and learn from each other (Ellis, 2003). All the previously analyzed characteristics constitute the basis of TBLT. Based on those elements, writing of a syllabus for TBLT was attempted. There are noted two early applications of TBLT within the framework of CLT; the Malaysian Communicational Syllabus (1975) and the Bangalore Project (Beretta & Davies, 1985; Prabhu, 1987; Beretta, 1990) both of which were short-lived projects but with positive effects. Since then, researchers studied the approach more to make it easier applicable.

Regarding the connections of TBLT with Communicative Language Teaching methodology, the approach was supported by second language acquisition theorists and it was essentially noticed within applied linguistics (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Motivated by the name, the core of TBLT approach is the Task.

What Is a Task?

In TBLT, the most basic element we need to define is the "task" itself. This need results from the remark that no research or language pedagogy offers a complete agreement regarding at what constitutes a task and additionally there is no consistency in the terms employed to describe the different devices for the learners' production of language (Crookes, 1986). Specifically, there is confusion among the terms "task", "exercise", "activity" and "drill", since all of them refer to devices that will elicit learners' language but they have different purposes and yield different results. For the purposes of this study that draws the attention on TBLT theory, we will try to provide a definition of the term "task" by classifying all the other terms (exercise, activity, drills) into a single set.

In our analysis of the two sets ("task" constitutes the one set and all the other terms are included in the other set) the key difference between "tasks" and "exercises" is identified in the kind of meaning involved and not just in "form" as opposed to "meaning".

In a task we are concerned with “pragmatic meaning”, whereas in an exercise what matters is “semantic meaning” (Widdowson, 1998). In a language learning exercise, that belongs to the traditional language teaching methods, the focus lies on examples for the solution of language problems. In contrast, within a task the solution of language problems should be found through the learners’ available language. The task, in this circumstance, is presented to the learners not as an example, but as a real situation that leads to a real outcome (Richards & Renandya, 2004). Ellis (2003) attempted to synthesize many definitions from other researchers rather than providing a new one and created a set of essential criteria that form a language learning task:

A work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may dispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears resemblance, direct or indirect, to the language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills and also various cognitive processes. (Ellis, 2003, p.16)

Similarly to Ellis, Willis and Willis (2009) did not choose to provide a new definition for “task” but a set of certain criteria which determine how task-like a given activity is:

A task has a number of defining characteristics, among them: does it engage the learners’ interest; is there a primary focus on meaning; is success measured in terms of non-linguistic outcome rather than accurate use of language forms; and does it relate to real world activities? The more confidently we can answer yes to each of these questions the more task-like the activity. (Willis & Willis, 2009, p. 4)

Willis and Willis criteria were not helpful for everyone; therefore some researchers presented their own arguments against those criteria. It is argued that the criteria are not useful and that it is difficult to identify what is on offer (Harmer, 2009), as well as that it is the conceptual uncertainty of the tasks and the approach in general that did not make it feasible for application in East Asian EFL contexts (Littlewood, 2007). Bearing in mind all the prior literature concerning task’s definition, Samuda and Bygate (2008) formed a recent and more generally accepted definition on a task by providing an explanation of the processes and the aims of a task-based teaching that would be more comprehensible especially for the teachers.

Specific Task

For the purposes of this essay we will reflect on the previously analyzed TBLT theory with reference to a specific task. The task was retrieved from the personal web page of Jane and Dave Willis named ‘WILLIS-ELT’ and is part of their professional occupation with task-based learning teaching. The task is entitled as ‘Robbery in a Sweet Shop’ and addresses to intermediate language level ESL (English as a Second Language) students. As it was mentioned before, each task can be evaluated based on three distinctive characteristics; its elements, structure and features. In our analysis of the selected task we will try to examine all these characteristics starting with the task’s elements.

The academic goal of the task is students to learn how to use correctly the verbs followed by the to-infinitive. The vocabulary and the phrases written on the board in the beginning of the task form the input data of the task and three activities are suggested during the task cycle. The teacher acquires different roles depending on the stages of the task. In the specific task, the teacher is the selector and the sequencer of the task, the person who is preparing the learners for the task and that raises the consciousness of the learners whenever they have to notice critical features of the language. The roles of the learners that are assumed in this task are the group participant, the monitor (students notice the use of language in actual communication), the risk-taker and innovator (students guess from clues and consult each other) (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

The setting that is suggested in this task is group and class work and the use of materials such as realia (true story reported in *The Guardian* newspaper) and the board. Having gathered information about the task’s elements, we should turn our analysis on the task’s structure relation to the TBLT theory. For the pre-task phase of the selected task the teacher provides an introduction to the topic and the task, so as the students to start engaging with the task and acquire essential information that will assist the learners while completing the task. It is suggested that the teacher should make use of the board at this stage to communicate with the students basic elements of the task, such as the characters of the story, the setting, the props and some key phrases of the story.

That technique aims at encouraging learners to speculate on the story on the basis of a few clues. Following the information about the topic, the teacher should inform the students about the task. The teacher should explain some of the words and phrases which might cause difficulties and ask learners what they think happened in the story, but should not tell them if their guesses are right or wrong. Afterwards, the students should try to guess what happened in the story by using as many of the ideas on the board as they can. The best thing is for them to work in pairs or groups and discuss their ideas, as this will give them a lot of speaking practice. After that, the teacher is going to ask some of the students to tell their stories in front of the class.

It is suggested that the learners are provided with some time to prepare their stories. During this pre-task stage the teacher should go round and listen as the students work. Having completed the introductory phase, the students are engaging with the actual task during the task cycle. The students at this point should carry out the task and prepare their stories, as well as appoint a spokesperson for each group by the end of the time they were appointed. The teacher should advise the groups to work with the spokesperson to prepare the final version of their story and then one of them will tell the story in front of the class. For the purposes of the task, the teacher should try to choose a spokesperson who thinks the young man is the robber and then ask the others if their stories are the same or different. Again, the teacher should choose someone who has a different story and additionally thinks the eight-year-old is the robber to tell it.

For the last minutes of the task cycle, it is advised to engage the class in a discussion as to whose story is the most likely and the teacher to hand out the story for the students to read. Afterwards, it is time the teacher draw the students' attention to language focus. Since the purpose of the task is the teaching of verbs followed by the to-infinitive, the teacher can include exercises and activities related to the story that will help students to practice the language. In the stage of language focus, it is suggested that the teacher should classify the activities into three categories; the identification, the analysis and the practice activities. The identification activity asks from the students to underline all the phrases with *to*, the analysis activity requires combining some sentences with two different patterns of verbs followed by the to-infinitive and the practice activity suggests a class discussion around one of the topics provided that the will be of students' choice.

The selected task includes all the categories of a task structure making it more effective and easier for the students to accomplish it. Task features are the last characteristics of the specific task that we will examine according to the TBLT theory. The whole teaching and learning is accomplished through the task itself and not through a sentence or text. This task focuses on meaning rather than form, since the teacher focuses on the final outcome of the task, and efficiency is more significant than correctness, with result the emphasis towards creativity between the students in their group and class work. In this task, the students come in contact with real world language use, having the story been reported in *The Guardian* newspaper. The above mentioned criteria allow us to consider that the communicative purpose is emphasized in the selected task.

Assessment

Assessment in TBLT is considered to be more difficult than in traditional approaches, where the subject of assessment focuses on discrete items, such as grammar, vocabulary and phonology. The difficulty lies on the kind of the material to be assessed, since in TBLT the teacher has to do an assessment within the frame of the task provided. The assessment in this particular approach (TBLT) can be of two types: task-based assessment and performance assessment (Brown, 2004).

Task-based assessment can be described as the strong form of performance testing (McNamara, 1996), where the students' performance is assessed by "pre-determined, real-world criterion elements and criterion levels" (Brown, Hudson, Norris, & Bonk, 2002, p. 10). This kind of assessment focuses on whether the performance on the task was successful or not and does not pay attention to specific units of the language (Long and Norris, 2001). For this reason the authenticity of the task is of paramount importance.

In contrast, the other type of TBLT assessment, the performance assessment, does not center its focus on the success or failure to complete the task. Particularly, it aims at evaluating the performances of the specific language components that the testers choose to assess and it is based on three fundamental interpretive purposes.

The concern of the first purpose is the accomplishment of the specific task according to the objectives of the learner; the second purpose covers the evaluation of different qualities of learners' language abilities; and the last purpose of performance assessment is the interpretation of particular aspects of students' language learning within an educational environment (Brown, Hudson, Norris, & Bonk, 2002). Based on the research upon TBLT assessment, we will further examine possible ways of students' assessment in their completion of the selected and previously analyzed task.

A potential way of assessment that the teacher can employ belongs to task-based assessment, which means that the whole performance on the task will be taken into consideration. Specifically, learners could be assessed based on the stories that each group produced. The teacher can evaluate the final outcome as successful or not considering three criteria: the accuracy, complexity and fluency of the produced stories (Skehan, 1996). Regarding to accuracy the teacher can check whether the stories "involve the minimum level of precision in code usage necessary for successful communication".

For the evaluation based on complexity the teacher should test if the completed task "involves the minimum range of grammatical/structural code required for successful completion of a given communication task". Fluency of the task could be tested by examining whether the stories "involve the minimum on-line flow required by a given task for successful (acceptable) communication" (Norris, Brown, Hudson, & Yoshioka, 1998, p.58-59). The learners could be assessed in their completion of the task with a different way according to performance assessment. Since in performance assessment the focus is not on the accomplishment or not of the task but, on the contrary, the task is a 'vehicle' through which language performance is elicited in order to assess certain language abilities and knowledge (Brown, Hudson, Norris, & Bonk, 2002, p. 10), the teacher could test the learners' language performance on the use of verbs followed by the to-infinitive. For this reason the teacher has to select a sentence from the story, write it on the board and ask some students to read the sentence aloud.

After that, the teacher should erase two or three words from the board and the students have to work in groups in order to find the missing words from the sentence. Then the teacher should erase some more words from the board and the students again in groups have to fill in the blank. With regards to the two presented ways of assessment, it can be mentioned that TBLT assessment is not an effortless procedure. Teachers who will adopt that kind of assessment need to be skilled enough as judges and observers to be able to evaluate the characteristics of learners' language and diagnose particular problems, if they exist. The most effective way for the teacher to succeed it comes through the gain of enough experience on teaching according to task-based learning (Brindley, 2001).

Conclusion

In conclusion, researchers and educators agree that even though PPP is an approach more easily adopted by the teacher due to its clear structure and objectives, we cannot overcome the fact that TBLT address more effectively the demands of a modern classroom, of the modern learners who seem to look for an educational concept that is more student-centered and allows an efficient amount of communication during the teaching and learning process. These demands follow the general turn of the society towards communicative teaching and learning, since people need to use the second language in terms of the modern multi-cultural society.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that PPP has been transformed, even if the supporters of TBLT do not acknowledge it. The revised PPP approach has left in the past some of the characteristics that were negatively criticized by researchers. Particularly, the notions of mechanical, implicit and accuracy based learning as well as form- and teacher-centeredness have been reviewed according to the principles of a more communicative approach. In the revised approach of PPP we find a preference towards meaningful learning and learners' practice on actual use of the second language through tasks, in order to acquire a more automatized knowledge, while the procedures to be followed now in PPP are more similar to those of TBLT. As a consequence, their distinction is based on the area of providing implicit or explicit knowledge, meaning that the gap between the two approaches is becoming shallower.

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Appendices

1)

The Characters:

A shopkeeper
Her two children
A young man
An eight-year-old boy
The police

The Setting:

A corner shop in Ashton-under-Lyme, Manchester.

The Props (things used in the story):

A balaclava
A packet of Smarties
A plastic bag
A gun

Some phrases from the story:

A young man came in to buy a newspaper.
He pointed a gun at her and told her to fill up the bag.
I pretended to reach for some money.
They are taking the case very seriously, like all cases which involve a firearm, fake or not.

Eight-year-old tries to rob sweet shop.

Manchester police are looking for an eight-year-old boy who attempted to hold up a sweet shop last night in the suburb of Ashton-under-Lyme.

The boy, who was wearing a balaclava, went into the corner shop and bought a packet of Smarties for 25p. As the shopkeeper gave him his change a young man came in to buy a newspaper. The boy waited until the man had gone then threw a plastic bag at the shopkeeper. At the same time he pointed a gun at her and told her to fill up the bag.

“I’m not sure whether he wanted me to fill it with sweets or with money,” said the shopkeeper, who did not want to give her name. “I didn’t know if the gun was real or not, but it certainly looked more real than the guns my little boy plays with. I was quite frightened because I had my children with me. I pretended to reach for some money, but I pressed the alarm instead. When it went off he turned and ran out of the shop.”

She described the boy as 1.2 metres tall, and dressed in jeans and a dark coat. The police are asking the public to help. They say they are taking the case very seriously, like all cases which involve a firearm, fake or not.

2) Ask learners to underline all the phrases with to:

tries to rob sweet shop; attempted to hold up a sweet shop; to buy a newspaper; told her to fill up the bag; whether he wanted me to fill the bag with sweets or with money; who did not want to give her name; I pretended to reach for some money; asking the public to help.

3) Ask them to look at these patterns:

Pattern A

VERB	<i>to</i>	VERB
tries	<i>to</i>	rob
attempted	<i>to</i>	hold up
(not) want	<i>to</i>	give
pretended	<i>to</i>	reach for

Pattern B

VERB	NOUN	<i>to</i>	VERB
told	her	<i>to</i>	fill up
wanted	me	<i>to</i>	fill
asking	the public	<i>to</i>	help

Look at these sentences. Are they pattern A or pattern B?

- I need to borrow some money.
- We need someone to help us.
- The boy ordered her to fill up the bag.
- We always had to get up early.
- Can you help me to carry these boxes?

4) Lead class discussions based on this:

Choose ***either***:

- Three things you *want/would like* to do over the next year.

OR

- Three things you *hope/intend/plan to do* over the next year.

Write down the three things in your book. Close your book. See How many things you can remember.