

Interview

Task-Based Language Teaching and Its Challenge in China: An Interview with Rod Ellis

Lun Peng

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Rod Ellis is Research Professor in Curtin University (Australia), visiting professor at Shanghai International Studies University, China and Emeritus Distinguished Professor of the University of Auckland, New Zealand. He is also a fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand. He has written extensively on second language acquisition and task-based language teaching. His most recent (co-authored) book is *Task-based Language Teaching: Theory and Practice* (2020) published by Cambridge University Press, UK.

We know you are currently a Research Professor at Curtin University in Perth Australia. Are you still involved in teaching? How much of your work time involves in research?

The only teaching I do for Curtin University is on an MA unit on Task-based Language Teaching for Vietnamese students in Vietnam. But I do have five PhD students whom I supervise. Otherwise I am engaged in research, including a research project on testing pragmatic competence funded by the Australian Research Council. Of course, I do some teaching in my role as Visiting Professor at Shanghai International Studies University.

In a career spanning more than 40 years, what trends do you see for English language teaching?

I am wary of predicting trends but the most obvious development in recent years has been in electronically mediated language teaching and teacher training. As in all spheres of life, electronically mediated activity will continue to increase in both language teaching and teacher training. The closing of universities due to the coronavirus will drive this development faster. Asian countries are behind in this and need to catch up.

As a well-known proponent of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), what do you think helps differentiate TBLT from other teaching approaches?

The main difference between TBLT and other, more traditional approaches is that it takes ‘task’ not ‘language’ as its starting point for a language curriculum. That is, in a task-based lesson there is no prior

specification of the language that will be taught and learned. The focus is on achieving the task outcome. What students learn from performing a task cannot be predicted accurately. In TBLT they learn the language contiguously with learning to use it to communicate. The distinction between 'knowing' and 'using' disappears.

What could teachers do to accommodate TBLT to the needs of students with low language proficiency?

I have written extensively about how to do TBLT with beginner level or low proficiency students. Clearly such students are not ready to perform speaking tasks. For this reason, teachers need to make use of input-based tasks (i.e. simple listening and reading tasks), which can get students started on learning and provide the basis for output-based tasks later. I have written an article on using input-based tasks with beginner learners in the *Journal of Language Teaching to Young Learners*. And, by the way, I'd like to encourage readers of this interview to have a look at this journal and to think about contributing to it.

There are a few mismatches between teaching and learning traditions in China and the principles of TBLT. For example, Chinese students depend heavily on the teacher while TBLT require students to learn independently. If you were a teacher, what strategies would you employ to help students learn independently?

It is a fallacy to characterize TBLT as 'learner-centered' and requiring students to learn independently. While it is true that small group work has an important place in TBLT, not all lessons – or all parts of a lesson – need to be based on small group work. For example, input-based tasks are inevitably teacher-centered (i.e. the teacher performs these tasks with the whole class). Even information-gap speaking tasks can be performed with the whole class. What is perhaps different between TBLT and learning traditions in China is that students are not told which specific language they are supposed to learn. Traditional teaching requires intentional learning. TBLT requires incidental learning.

With the development of communicative approach in China, many teachers think it is unnecessary for students to learn grammar. Do any other Asian countries have the same phenomenon? Do you think it's possible to learn English as a foreign language without studying grammar?

Grammar teaching and intentional grammar learning lie at the heart of most language curricula in Asian countries although educational authorities throughout Asia are trying to move away from this. The problem is that the examinations continue to be quite traditional and encourage a focus on grammar. Is it possible to learn a language without learning grammar? No, learning grammar is an essential part of language learning but it doesn't have to be learned intentionally, it can be learned incidentally, for example through extensive reading. So, is it possible to learn a language without studying grammar? Yes, there is no need to study grammar. But in my view some intentional learning of grammar is helpful and perhaps unavoidable) so long as it does not become the main way of trying to learn a language. My opinion differs from some other advocates of TBLT, who see no room for intentional grammar learning.

How can teachers keep a balance between a focus on meaning and a focus on form during TBLT?

TBLT involves both a focus on meaning and on form. The pre-task phase of a lesson offers an opportunity for focusing on form (but vocabulary rather than grammar). The post-task phase can also involve form-focused activities. In the main task phase, which is where students perform the task, the primary focus should be achieving the task outcome and therefore on meaning. But there is also an opportunity for some focus on form during this phase – for example, when a student makes an error, the teacher can quickly correct it or, in the case of an input-based task the teacher can repeat and emphasize a key word or phrase to help students process the meaning while listening. Teachers need to be skilled in drawing students' attention to form without losing sight of the task purpose, which is to achieve the task outcome.

Assignment/Homework is an important means by which language learning is successfully achieved. However, in the real situation many teachers assign homework to their students in a “random” manner, resulting in that practice doesn't necessarily make perfect. From the teacher's perspective, what should they do to make the assignment/homework more effective, or what principles should they follow when they design assignment/homework?

I am not sure practice ever makes perfect – at least not where language learning is concerned and probably not in any aspects of life. I think we should get rid of this glib axiom 'practice makes perfect'. Homework clearly has a part to play in TBLT. Class time needs to be spent on performing tasks and facilitating incidental learning. But homework offers an opportunity for intentional learning – for example, learning some of the words that figure in performing a task. Homework also offers the opportunity to rehearse tasks. For example, students could be asked to repeat a task they did in class, record it on their cellphone, play it back and listen to it, and then have another go at recording it before sending it to their teacher. Or if they recorded their performance of a task in class, they could replay it, prepare a transcript of what was said, identify the errors they and other students made, and try to correct them.

As the general understanding of TBLT develops, the expectations on the teachers grow. Teachers who lack a systematic understanding of TBLT may end up feeling overwhelmed. If you were a teacher trainer, what would you do to help them get through the struggles?

This is really a question about the importance of teacher-training. Yes, TBLT will never thrive unless teachers receive training in how to do it and develop expertise in designing their own tasks. But for teachers who have not received training I have a suggestion. They could read my short and simple book *Introducing Task-based Language Teaching* published by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. Then, rather than trying to switch over night to doing TBLT, which is not likely to work, they could experiment with the occasional task-based lesson or else set aside 10 minutes in their normal lessons to experiment with tasks.

As an author of numerous reference books and coursebooks, do you remember your first journal publication article? If a Chinese novice researcher wants to get his/her research published in internationally recognized journals, what suggestions would you give them?

I don't have a clear recollection of my first journal article. I have a good recollection of a language course I wrote with Brian Tomlinson for use in Zambia in the 1970s. I also have a good recall of my first academic book – *Classroom Second language Development*, published by Pergamon but probably out of print now. This was partly based on my PhD thesis. Getting published in international journals is difficult and the first thing to understand is that you must be prepared to fail and try and try again. The first article I submitted to a journal was rejected. That I do remember! If you are new to publishing, it is best to start with something concrete and practical (don't get lost in abstractions and theory) and aim for a journal that publishes articles of this kind. Also decide on the journal you are writing for before you begin to write and check that journal's guidelines before submitting an article.

Lun Peng is a journalist and a researcher of China Daily, China. She received her MA in TESOL with Applied Linguistics from the University of Central Lancashire, UK. Before joining the China Daily media group, she was a high school English teacher in Beijing, China. Her research interests include second language acquisition, teacher professional development, adolescent reading research and media literacy.