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"ANYTHING GOES" IN TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING MATERIALS? - THE NEED FOR PRINCIPLED MATERIALS EVALUATION, ADAPTATION AND DEVELOPMENT

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been attracting a lot of attention since the concept of "tasks" was given book-length treatment in second /foreign language education in the 1980s (Candlin & Murphy, 1987; Long, 1985; Nunan, 1989; Prabhu, 1987; Van den Branden, Bygate, & Norris, 2009a).

Extensive research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) seems to testify to the fact that TBLT provides opportunities for language acquisition in a naturalistic language learning environment in which participants negotiate ways of achieving real life outcomes in a meaning-focused way (Ellis, 2012; Long, 2014).

TBLT has come to feature in a growing number of curricula in various parts of the world (Thomas & Reinders, 2015; Van den Branden, 2006; Willis & Willis, 2007). Zhen and Borg (2014), for example, explain how the 2003 English language curriculum at senior secondary school level in the People's Republic of China recommends that task-based teaching methods be used to develop students' communicative competence. Luo and Gong (2015) report the current situations of TBLT in China after the revised edition of the Chinese National English Curriculum Standards (2011).

1.2 MISUNDERSTANDINGS REGARDING TBLT

There seems to be, however, remarkable confusion in terms of what exactly TBLT is, what TBLT materials look like and how TBLT may be implemented in the curriculum and classrooms (Ellis, 2009; Thomas & Reinders, 2015; Van den Branden, Bygate, & Norris, 2009b). As Van den Branden, Bygate and Norris (2009b, p. 7) put it:

> (…) tasks have been put to different uses in the fields of Applied Linguistics and Second Language Education. Researchers, administrators, syllabus designer, test developers and assessment centers, teacher trainers, teachers and students … have, each in their own preferred ways tried to integrate tasks in their work. Along with these different users … came a wide variety of different interpretations of task-based language teaching as a methodology and of its basic unit "task", giving some observers the impression that almost anything, from an information gap activity to a fill-the-gap grammar exercise in which the student is asked to add –s … to a list of isolated verb forms, can be called a "task".

Zheng and Borg (2014), for example, report how some aspects of the principles of TBLT have been received differently during the various stages of adoption and implementation in China. What they found was that the secondary school teachers in their study were not really clear about the differences between communicative activities and tasks. Furthermore, due to the exam pressure and their own teaching style preference, two out of three participants who have longer ELT experience were conducting classes with a much more formal element of grammar despite the recommendation in the Chinese curriculum. The third less experienced participant in their study believed in the value of TBLT and tried to implement it but was struggling to achieve the intended effects due to the large classes and to the students' resistance. International colleagues that I work with confirm that they share similar situations surrounding TBLT in their countries. They are willing to acknowledge the recommendation by SLA researchers but, when it comes to implementing TBLT, they feel somewhat overwhelmed with various obstacles such as the seeming lack of clarity of TBLT, exam pressures and parents' and students' expectations, not to speak of their heavy workload.

It is interesting to note that most of the arguments against TBLT such as exam pressures, students' and parents' expectations and teachers' workload are not new problems that are specifically caused by the introduction of TBLT. We have seen a very similar debate taking place in relation to Communicative Language Teaching. If TBLT proves to be successful in facilitating learners' learning then, in theory, the success rate in exams should increase. Parents and students should be happier. Task-based approaches are designed, in principle, to create optimal conditions for SLA (see Ellis, 2009 for a discussion of arguments for and against). In other words, TBLT is not something that creates new problems but is meant to tackle existing problems and to offer a prospect of more effective language teaching. The field of materials development could contribute in reducing the confusions as it bridges theory and practice and provides concrete materials that the teachers can select, evaluate, adapt or learn from to develop their own TBLT materials.

This paper firstly attempts to identify a set of common principles of TBLT and discuss how they may be turned into criteria for evaluation, adaptation and development of principled TBLT materials. Secondly, it examines the differences between tasks for SLA research and those for second/additional or foreign language learning and explores important factors in TBLT materials. Finally, an example of adapted materials for secondary school is presented to demonstrate how both SLA principles and TBLT principles could be applied to materials adaptation and development.

2. USING CONVERGENT TASK PRINCIPLES AS CRITERIA FOR EVALUATION, ADAPTATION AND DEVELOPMENT

As Ellis (2009, p. 221) emphasises, "… there is no single 'task-based teaching' approach". Just like the Communicative Approaches, TBLT is founded upon some fundamental principles. This means that multiple versions of TBLT can be developed as long as they satisfy the TBLT principles. The question arises here: if a teacher wants to employ TBLT in her class, how will he/she know the materials that he/she has chosen or developed are genuinely based on TBLT?

Though there are various accounts and versions of the definition of TBLT (see Van den Branden, 2006); comparison of those definitions helps us identify common core characteristics of TBLT as well as some divergence. For example, Ellis (2010, p. 35) argues that a language teaching activity must satisfy some criteria in order to justify being called a task: e.g. "There is a primary focus on meaning". Willis and Willis (2007, p. 13) suggest asking a set of questions to assess how "task-like" a given activity is, for example: "Is there a primary focus on meaning?" You can already see a similarity (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. A comparison of TBLT principles by Ellis (2010) and by Willis and Willis (2007)

Characteristic	Ellis (2010)	Willis & Willis (2007)
Primary focus on meaning	Yes (both semantic and pragmatic)	Yes
Reliance on the learners' own resources	Yes (linguistic or non-linguistic)	Yes (free use of language)
Language use in real world activities	Yes	Yes
A clearly defined outcome other than the use of language	Yes	Yes (success judged in terms of outcome)
Others	some kind of gap (e.g. information, opinion)	engagement of learners' interest

We could easily add more definitions by other proponents of TBLT (e.g. Van den Branden, 2006) in our comparison. The comparison would probably reveal that the top four principles in Table 1 appear in any TBLT definitions.

Note that the first three criteria (i.e. primary focus on meaning; reliance on learners' own resources; language use in real world – authenticity in contrast to language for learning) would be applicable to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This is understandable as TBLT derives from CLT.

What distinguishes TBLT from the Communicative Approaches, however, is the third characteristic, that is, prominent emphasis on a clearly defined outcome other than the use of language. For example, the learners may be asked to bake a cake in groups. The outcome is the cakes (i.e. a real life non-linguistic outcome). While the learners in groups are engaged in making cakes, they are likely to read the recipe, follow the instructions, negotiate who does what, etc. In order to achieve the non-linguistic outcome, the learners are exposed to language in use and also need to use the language for communication (linguistic output), thus providing opportunities for language acquisition.

Strictly speaking, original versions of TBLT (as in Prabhu, 1987) were based on the task-based syllabus in which specification of the target tasks such as map drawing or writing a school timetable replaced the traditional linguistic syllabus. TBLT methodology con-

sisted of procedures to support the task-based syllabus. However, current discussion on TBLT often seems to feature TBLT as a methodology that can be incorporated into different kinds of syllabus, including the traditional linguistic syllabus (see Samuda & Bygate, 2008; Thomas & Reinders, 2015).

In materials development, theory and practice go hand in hand. Every practice needs to be supported by relevant theories and every theory needs to be tested in practice. Going back to the example of a teacher who wants to know if the materials she chose or developed are genuinely based on TBLT, I would argue that TBLT principles such as the ones in Table 1 above can be used as criteria for selection, evaluation, adaptation and development of materials. For instance, combining the criteria by Ellis (2010) and the questions by Willis and Willis (2007), you could evaluate the materials by asking "To what extent are the materials:

- meaning focused?
- making use of learner resources?
- using language as we do in the real world?
- leading to a non-linguistic target outcome?
- involving an information gap?
- engaging?"

By using such criteria, Tomlinson and Masuhara (2013, p. 233) reviewed six of the most recent global adult courses from major publishers. One of their findings led them to reiterate the point made by Masuhara, Hann, Yi and Tomlinson (2008, p. 310) on a different eight global adult courses:

> We regretted the increase in attention given to explicit knowledge of grammar at the expense of … "real tasks which have an intended outcome other than the practice of forms".

Similarly, Cai Changshi (2014) analysed an English course book named *Go for it* (GFI), a popular course book used for Grade 8 (i.e. pre-intermediate) in junior high schools in China. This book claims to be based on TBLT with David Nunan as Chief Editor. It conforms to the Chinese New English Curriculum (2001) and was approved by National Primary and Secondary Textbook Inspection in 2003. What she found was that the majority of the activities were in fact PPP and explicit forms-focused exercises. Cai (2014, p. 202) speculated on possible reasons in that:

1. Chinese teachers prefer their role as a "controller of class";
2. Chinese teachers believe that PPP is easy to implement and that it is effective in teaching English for exams;
3. Both teachers and students welcome a PPP approach as it conforms to their deeply-rooted belief of "Practice makes perfect".

3. TASKS FOR SLA RESEARCH AND TASKS FOR SECOND/FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

3.1 CAN TASKS IN SLA RESEARCH BE DIRECTLY IMPORTED TO CLASSROOMS?

The relationship between SLA research and the applicability of SLA research findings to second/foreign language education has been controversial (Ellis, 2010). Take, for example, an SLA definition of "input" as a pre-curser of language acquisition. According to Gass and Mackey (2006, p. 5), "Input refers to language that is available to the learner through any medium (listening, reading or gestural in the case of sign language)". This definition serves SLA researchers with specific focus.

It seems necessary for educationalists, however, to be more inter-disciplinary in their definition of input. Observing learners and reflecting our own perception, we realise that we receive a multi-sensory input as well as a linguistic one. Educationalists may well be aware that the human brain processes multi-modal input, combines it with our inner resources and creates holistic mental representation in our minds (Masuhara, 2005). Especially, in the digital multi-modal age, an SLA definition of input sounds too narrow to reflect learner perception and comprehension.

When it comes to tasks used in SLA research, Van den Branden, Bygate and Norris (2009b, p. 8), after listing the major areas of TBLT that have been studied in SLA research, point out that:

> In the majority of these studies, oral interaction tasks have been used; far less research has been carried out in which reading and writing tasks were involved. In addition, quite often the same kind of oral interaction tasks (particular types of information gap tasks … have been recycled by many researchers, creating the impression to the outside world that task-based syllabuses make use of only a handful of 'classics' which are (or should be) recycled again and again. (…) in the majority of SLA studies where in participants were asked to perform tasks, the main research questions have focused on formal properties of the output produced during task performance, or on the acquisition of particular linguistic forms (through the use of tasks), rather than on the question of whether the instructional use of tasks ultimately enables the student to acquire language ability and apply it in performing a variety of authentic tasks to criterion.

A similar point was made by Samuda (2009) and she mentions the scarcity of contextualised TBLT studies that investigate various contributors for language acquisition. Her study (2009), for example, demonstrates the values of teachers' roles in acquisition in a specific classroom setting, for example, the effect of "pre-casting" and "conversational interweaves" as supportive and/or responsive input that facilitates uptake and acquisition.

From a slightly different angle, Masuhara (in press) argues the vital necessity for SLA research and second/additional or foreign language education to recognise the role of affect (i.e. "aspects of emotion, feeling, mood or attitude which condition behavior" (Brown & Arnold, 1999, p. 1)) as a major factor in cognition, memory and the learning process. She reports that:

> Brain studies seem to provide undeniable anatomical and physiological evidence that affect plays a vital and fundamental role in human biological and social survival

(Damasio, 1994; Damasio & Carvalho, 2013; Gazzaniga et al, 2014; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). With the help of the advancement of clinical and experimental studies supported by neuroimaging, neuroscientists are able to show how memory (i.e. learning) can be enhanced or diminished by affective colouring and how such structural mechanisms have developed in the evolution of the species.

Based on this understanding of how affect drives learning and memory, the analysis of most of the tasks used in SLA research seem to be somewhat biased on cognitive and linguistic processing, for example, uptake and retention of specific linguistic features. It may even appear to outsiders as if learners were only significant as data providers and as if the personal engagement and development of the learners were insignificant (Ellis, 2010) attempts to provide a wider array of pedagogical tasks).

The brain seems to be designed to enhance life through learning. In this sense, relevance, meaningfulness and the value of tasks to the individual play crucial roles. The tasks should be engaging and contribute to well-being so much so that the learners would want more (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). This means that in TBLT material evaluation, adaptation and development, affective engagement should be the prime criterion when writing or selecting texts and tasks. The individualistic nature of affect may encourage learner choice of texts and tasks in designing materials. Ways of achieving this might include helping learners to select or find a text that they want to use with the tasks specified in their materials or selecting from a menu of tasks those they want to use in response to a potentially engaging text.

3.2 HOW CAN A TEACHER EVALUATE, ADAPT AND DEVELOP TBLT MATERIALS THAT ARE LIKELY TO HELP THE LEARNER ACQUIRE THE TARGET LANGUAGE?

The emphasis on affect in educational TBLT materials then leads us back to the teacher who is searching for *effective* TBLT materials. The first set of evaluation criteria based on Task principles suggested in Section 2 above are likely to help her sift TBLT from pseudo-TBLT materials. Such evaluation, however, does not necessarily measure the effectiveness of the materials in terms of language acquisition.

What she might then do is to conduct a pre-use evaluation of the effectiveness of the TBLT materials. Obviously, if she is able to also research while-use and post-use evaluation of the effect of the materials on the learners, her evaluation study would have even more convincing empirical validity. What she needs then is a set of evaluation criteria that takes learning principles that can be used for materials evaluation, adaptation and development.

Tomlinson (2011, 2013a, 2013b), based on his survey of SLA and learning theories in educational and cognitive psychology, articulates influential factors that play important roles in language acquisition, such as cognitive and affective engagement. A systematic evaluation based on these learning principles (as in Tomlinson, 2013a; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2013) will help the teachers to estimate some likelihood of learner engagement, language acquisition and development through the TBLT materials. Tomlinson (2013b) explains how learning principles can be turned into

evaluation criteria. Tomlinson usefully explains how a teacher can develop universal and local criteria as well as other kinds of criteria that suit local contexts and purposes of evaluation. For example, Tomlinson (2013a) provides eight universal criteria and exemplifies how these criteria can be used to evaluate materials. He argues that these universal criteria would be appropriate for any learners and contexts in the evaluation of materials as they are based on fundamental learning principles.

Table 2. Materials Evaluation sheet based on universal language learning principles
(adapted from Tomlinson, 2013a)

Evaluation Criteria To what extent are the materials likely to:		4 Highly likely	3 Likely	2 Unlikely	1 Highly unlikely
1.	provide rich and meaningful exposure to language in use?				
2.	engage learners affectively?				
3.	engage learners cognitively?				
4.	help the learners notice how L2 is used?				
5.	help the learners to make use of those mental resources typically used in the L1?				
6.	provide opportunities to use language for communication?				
7.	give opportunities for contextualised and purposeful communication in the L2?				
8.	allow learners to focus on meaning?				

4. AN EXAMPLE OF ADAPTATION BASED ON TBLT AND LANGUAGE LEARNING EVALUATION CRITERIA

I would now like to demonstrate how these SLA/learning principled criteria (as in Table 2) could be used for materials adaptation and development by actually providing a case of adapting materials. Following the same principles, teachers/different materials developers could produce different adapted materials. What is useful about these criteria is that they can be used to evaluate the adapted materials. With such a common measurement device, the teacher seeking for effective TBLT materials can evaluate the validity of a variety of materials. Ideally materials should be trialled and put to use and then go through while- and post-evaluation.

4.1 THE ORIGINAL MATERIALS

Van Gorp and Bogaert (2006, pp. 92–93) include a potentially engaging text and tasks entitled *A gruesome performance* taken from a secondary course book in Belgium. As the text is rather long, I will provide below a description of the teaching procedures, a summary of the text and an excerpt of task instructions (in a square box). [ ] signifies teachers' actions.

1. [The teacher introduces and reads the first part of the text *A gruesome performance*.]

Summary of the first part of the text:

The first part of the text explains how an Indian magician scares and fascinates his audience at the same time through his magic performance. His magic involves: an ordinary rope standing up in the air; his assistant climbing up the rope; the magician following the disobedient assistant up the rope then dismembering his assistant with a knife in the air; the magician coming down and helping the assistant emerge from a basket, intact and smiling in front of the stunned audience.

2. Tasks to follow (Extract from Van Gorp & Bogaert, 2006, p. 92)

Task: How does this work? How do you think this 'miracle' can be explained?

Here are a number of possible explanations. Which one do you think is the correct one?

- The fakir has magic powers: he defies the laws of gravity and has the power to resuscitate the dead.
- The fakir is in fact an extraordinary hypnotist: though mass hypnosis he makes the audience believe that certain things happen which in reality do not happen at all.
- The fakir uses a trick.

After ticking the answer of your choice, ask your neighbour whether s/he has chosen the same answer or another one.

Who is right and who is wrong? Find out by reading the text opposite.

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3. The continuing text (Van Gorp & Bogaert, 2006, p. 93) explains the trick.

4.2 EVALUATION OF THE ORIGINAL TEXT AND TASKS

Materials evaluation, adaptation and development cannot happen in a vacuum. So, not knowing the details of the students and contexts make this venture rather tricky. However, I am making an assumption that the teenager learners' proficiency ranges from CEFR B1-B2 and that they are fairly independent and difficult to please.

I am now going to evaluate the original materials according to the first set of TBLT criteria identified in Section 2 above. In relation to the first criterion of "meaning-focused", I would rate the original materials highly. As for the second criterion of "utilisation of learner resources", my rating is not very high. It is good that the students are asked to listen to the first part of the text, explaining how the magic is performed and that they are invited to think about the mechanisms of the Indian magic. However, giving the three options seems to me to stop them from making fuller use of their cognitive and linguistic resources. The pair work of finding out what the other student may have chosen is not likely to lead to an extended discussion. In real life situations, we may have a chat to find out what the other person's choice may be but the interaction could finish in less than a second. The following task of reading the remainder of the text could lead to "a non-linguistic target outcome", that is finding out the correct answer and it involves an information gap. As for engagement, I can easily imagine that teenage students may skim the text in the next page, find the answers and lose interest.

Having Tomlinson's criteria (2013a) in Table 2 in mind, I will now move onto my adaptation of these original materials, inviting the readers to evaluate the adapted materials. To give an overall explanation, I have made the following changes:

1. I have developed three subtasks (one subtask intended for one lesson), leading up to the main task with the text *A gruesome performance* so that more productive skills are integrated than in the originals.

2. I have made use of the Text-Driven Framework (Tomlinson, 2013c) in developing these subtasks. The Text-Driven Framework uses engaging texts (e.g. Youtube videos in subtask 1) to drive the materials. These texts provide the authentic input, that is the exposure to authentic language in use as well as the resources for subsequent productive tasks. Note that one of the criticisms of TBLT is the potential "input poverty" that could result from more output-orientated procedures (see Ellis, 2009).

3. Each subtask is designed to have real-life outcomes and doing the tasks requires negotiation of meaning in groups.

4. Each subtask is meant to cognitively and linguistically prepare the students for the next task and there is recycling of language. There are some activities that focus on form as part of their sequence.

4.3 ADAPTED MATERIALS

Subtask 1. A bit of magic (Listening and Speaking)

1. Do you like magic? We're going to watch a short video of Tommy Cooper. He is a much loved English stand-up comedian/magician. You never know whether his magic will succeed or not. Watch this video and find out.

[Teacher plays Tommy Cooper's 'Vase Trick' Youtube]
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4c4zkMl8Ro

2. Can you do any party tricks? In every party there comes a time when the buzz is fading. People would appreciate some entertainment. Tell your neighbour if you have some tricks up your sleeve.

3. My colleague was really good at saving low moments in parties with his magic tricks. Let me show you one trick that he taught me. [Teacher performs torn and restored paper]

4. Well, how did I restore the torn paper? Discuss in groups. Shout out your guesses when invited.

5. Watch a Youtube video of *Torn and Restored Paper – Magic Tricks Revealed* [Teacher plays Youtube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HfVwzBuckQ)]

6. Form groups of four. You're going to perform a magic trick, and then describe the trick in the next class.

    Decide as a group which magic trick you're going to perform and how you're going to do it.

    Search the Internet for ideas. Be ready by next week.

    You'll be peer-assessed according to the following criteria: Entertaining? Clear? Impactful?

    If you wish, you could video-tape your performance and upload your video on Youtube. If you need help, ask me for group tutorials by emails.

Subtask 2. Group performance of their magic trick (Reading during preparation and Speaking)

7. Who would like to perform first?

    When you watch another group perform, fill in the peer assessment form.
    One feedback sheet per group so you need to agree on your rating.
    The feedback will be returned to the group who have done the performance.

Subtask 3. Compiling a booklet of party tricks to sell at School Events (Writing of instructions)

8. Write up your group's presentation so that we can produce a class booklet of magic to sell at our School Exhibition Day.

9. Show your write up to another group and ask them for advice on your content

10. Show your write up to another group and ask them for advice on your language

11. Submit your final draft to the teacher by xxxx.

12. [The teacher picks up major linguistic areas to focus on prior to the next session]

13. Let's look at some of the use of language that could be improved [The teacher elicits suggestions for improvement from the students. If necessary, form-focused teaching could take place within the flow of the TBLT].

14. [The teacher gets the students to sell their booklet at the School Exhibition Day (successful sale as a criterion for assessment?)]

Subtask 4. Writing the second part of the text on *Indian Magic Revealed* (Integrated Skills and expository writing)

15. Listen and mime to a text: *A Gruesome Performance*.

16. Individually read the text.

17. Individually, reflect upon the "the truth".

18. Form groups and come up with a group description of how this magic was performed.

19. Take part in a class discussion on *Indian Miracle Revealed*.

20. In groups, write a draft of the next section of the text *Indian Miracle Revealed*.

21. Read the next section of the text to see the similarities and differences in terms of content.

22. Individually, compare your group draft with the text in terms of expressions and structures.

23. In groups, list major differences and similarities between your group draft and the text.

24. Report back to the whole class for discussion.

25. Homework. Individually revise the group writing based on your language discoveries. Submit your revised version to the teacher.

Readers are invited to use the evaluation criteria in Table 2 above and conduct pre-use evaluation. It would be appreciated if readers could try out the materials and report to me how the materials were received. It would be great if while- and post-use evaluation took place.

5. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have discussed how identifying TBLT principles may help reduce some confusion of what TBLT is and what TBLT materials may look like. I have suggested making use of TBLT principles as evaluation criteria so TBLT materials can be distinguished from pseudo-TBLT materials. In addition, I have strongly argued for using some additional language acquisition criteria for materials evaluation, adaptation and development in order to enhance the likelihood of making TBLT materials more engaging and amenable for language acquisition and development. I have provided an example of principled materials adaptation to illustrate my arguments and for readers to evaluate using the criteria in Table 2.

I believe in the potential values of TBLT in engaging learners and in creating a much needed language acquisition environment in TEFL. The advantages of criterion-referenced materials evaluation, adaptation and development include that they provide concrete products and procedures for articulating and for examining the principles behind our teaching practice. What is even better is that the materials are likely to influence teachers' actions much more than the abstract theoretical discussions in SLA research or political pronouncements on TBLT.

Through my adaptation example of intermediate TBLT materials I hope I have managed to demonstrate how TBLT and language acquisition principles can be realised in a principled way. Principled TBLT materials are likely to have greater potential both for helping learners to acquire communicative competence and for helping them to pass their examinations, too.

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YOUTUBE VIDEOS

Tommy Cooper's 'Vase Trick', Youtube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4c4zkMl8Ro

'Torn and Restored Paper - Magic Tricks Revealed' Youtube,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HfVwzBuckQ

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