

# TASK-BASED LANGUAGE LEARNING: AN INTERVIEW WITH ROD ELLIS<sup>1</sup>



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Rod Ellis is the Head of the Applied Language Studies and Linguistics Department at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. He is the author of a numerous books on Second Language Acquisition. Since 1980 he has authored well over 30 books and 100 articles on second language acquisition. In particular, he has contributed to key areas such as task-based learning, the role of explicit and implicit knowledge in SLA, the effects of corrective feedback, individual differences in SLA, SLA and language pedagogy, focus on form, the effects of fluency and accuracy on second language production, among others.

**M.J.R:** An increasing number of SLA researchers explicitly support task-based learning (TBL). How far in your experience do you think this is a case of *people following fashion*, as they did with previous approaches and how far does it represent a firmer commitment?

R.E: In many ways, task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a continuation of communicative language teaching (CLT). It can be seen as a *strong* form of CLT. Thus, I don't think it can really be seen as a *fashion*. TBLT is supported not just by a substantial body of SLA research, but also by educational theories that view instruction from an *interpretative* rather than *transmission* perspective. TBLT is entirely compatible with John Dewey's views about education.<sup>2</sup>

**M.J.R:** What is the psycholinguistic rationale for task-based pedagogy?

R.E: The psycholinguistic rationale for TBLT is based on the following:

- Learners have their own *built-in syllabus*,<sup>3</sup> which directs how they gradually learn the L2 systems (phonological, lexical, grammatical). This syllabus governs how they acquire implicit<sup>4</sup> knowledge of an L2.
- The primary goal of any form of language instruction is the development of implicit knowledge as, without this, learners will not be able to communicate effectively.

- Learning cannot be directed from the *outside*. Thus, the role of instruction is to facilitate learners' acquisition of implicit knowledge.
- Implicit knowledge is best facilitated not by attempting to teach the L2 item by item, but by providing the kind of experiences that have been shown to foster development. This can best be achieved by providing learners with opportunities to experience the L2 as a communicative tool.
- To assist learning, instruction needs to draw learners' attention to form while they are communicating through what is known as *focus on form*. The learning that results is *incidental rather than intentional*.
- The acquisition of implicit knowledge can also be facilitated by instruction that seeks to develop learners' explicit L2 knowledge. This knowledge, which is distinct from implicit knowledge, serves to help learners attend to form while communicating and thus fosters the processes responsible for the development of implicit knowledge.

**M.J.R:** Is there research evidence indicating that TBL is more effective in promoting language acquisition?

R.E: More effective than what? Than PPP<sup>5</sup>? This question can be addressed in two ways.

- By conducting a comparative study of TBLT and PPP. Such studies are very difficult to conduct as it is almost impossible to control the variables. Overall, comparative studies have rarely shown that one method is better than another. Beretta and Davies (1985) compared TBLT with a traditional *focus on forms* approach. The results were not clear-cut, but on the *neutral* tests they used to evaluate learning outcomes, the TBLT groups outperformed the traditional groups.
- By conducting studies that show that learning results from TBLT. There are many of these. Mackey's (1999) research on question forms is a good example. These studies evaluated learning in terms of learners' performance on communicative tasks designed to tap their implicit knowledge. However, these studies have not compared TBLT with other forms of instruction. Thus, they show that TBLT works but not that it is more effective than, say, explicit instruction. I would also point to the success of immersion programmes (now well-documented), as these programmes are in effect TBLT.

**M.J.R: The literature on SLA supports TBL; however, as Candlin said, there is no correspondence in the context of educational systems. If this is so, what is the reason for the mismatch between classroom pedagogy and insights from research?**

R.E: TBLT will always be difficult to implement in an instructional context such as secondary schools because the whole ethos of the curriculum in such schools is on specifying and measuring what is to be learned and thus to favour a structural syllabus. TBLT does not specify what is to be learned only what is to be done (i.e. the tasks). However, there have been attempts to implement TBLT in school contexts – see for example, Van den Branden's (2006) book or various publications by Willis (1996). Thus, it is possible. But it calls for a different philosophy of teaching and learning.

**M.J.R: What is a task? How do I know that I have planned a task and not an activity?**

R.E: I have defined a task as an activity with the following characteristics:

- a primary focus on meaning (i.e. learners are engaged in understanding and producing messages designed to communicate information and opinions)
- a gap of some kind (information, opinion, reasoning)
- the learners use their own linguistic resources (i.e. they do not simply reproduce language given to them)
- an outcome other than the display of correct language.

**M.J.R: How complex is task-based teaching? (Are there different types of tasks?)**

R.E: There are many different types of tasks. A key distinction is between input-providing tasks (such as listen-and-do tasks) and output tasks (speaking and writing). Various typologies of tasks exist. Some typologies are based on the kind of operation the learner has to perform (e.g. listing, classifying, describing, reporting, arguing). A very common distinction is between information-gap and opinion-gap tasks.

The main problem facing the design of a task-based course is how to grade and sequence tasks. There is no established framework for this. But, then, arguably, grading and sequencing is equally problematic in a structural course.

**M.J.R: What does task-based teaching/learning look like in the classroom? In other words, if we came into a TBL classroom, what differences would we immediately notice with a more traditional PPP approach?**

R.E: There is no one type of task-based lesson. A lesson can consist of three basic phases:

- pre-task phase
- main task phase
- post-task phase.

But only the main task phase is obligatory. In lessons with a pre-task phase where the learners are presented with the language they need to do the task, there may be little difference from a PPP lesson. I refer to this kind of lesson involving tasks as task-supported rather than task-based. In general, most advocates of TBLT

do not seek to present language in the pre-task phase, preferring instead other options, such as providing learners with time to plan the task before they start it.

**M.J.R:** Some teachers argue that TBL is chaotic (less manageable) for learners as opposed to more traditional methods/approaches to teaching. Do you agree with them? Does research support this view that maintains that learners learn more effectively when given their daily language dose? I mean, does the learner learn more effectively when teachers/syllabus designers provide them with manageable, carefully selected and controlled pieces of language?

R.E: The main problem with TBLT is that the teacher and the students may not be aware of what they have learned. This is because the learning is *incidental* rather than *intentional*. But teachers and learners can evaluate if they completed the task successfully – by inspecting the outcome. For example, if the task is of the listen-and-do kind (e.g. the students have to complete a map or timetable with information given to them), the teacher can check if they have completed it correctly. My own feeling is that teachers would do better to start off using tasks that have clear *closed* outcomes which they can evaluate on completion of the task. TBLT certainly does not have to be chaotic but requires a clear understanding of what tasks are, what TBLT is designed to achieve, and pragmatic decisions regarding which kinds of task to use.

**M.J.R:** Can a task have as the main goal the learning of a grammatical rule?

R.E: No, not the main goal. But a task can be *focused* –i.e. designed to elicit use of some specific linguistic feature(s)–. But it must still be a task, as I have defined above. And it must be evaluated primarily in terms of whether the students achieve the outcome of the task not in terms of whether they used the target feature correctly. It is important to recognize that even in a focused task learners will have the opportunity for learning language in general, not just the targeted feature.

**M.J.R:** Critics of task-based syllabus design argue that the task-based syllabus does not

**represent progress in syllabus design because there are no objective criteria for determining the type of tasks students will need. In addition, it is much more difficult to design a coherent syllabus. What is your view on this issue?**

R.E: Well, are there objective grounds for determining what grammatical structures learners will need? Arguably, it is much easier to cater to needs through *tasks* than through *grammatical structures*. This is quite obvious in the case of specific purpose courses (e.g. what tasks does a waiter have to perform to communicate effectively in his job?). Even in a general purpose course it is feasible to consider the kinds of tasks that learners might be interested in (e.g. choosing presents for members of a family).

**M.J.R:** Teachers are also reluctant to adopt TBL, often arguing that their learners will not be able to complete the tasks, that they need the grammar that will enable them to perform the task. What is your point of view?

R.E: This is a common misunderstanding. The first point is that, for basic communication, grammar is not needed. I can get by in Spanish and I have no grammar at all. Basic survival in a language relies on vocabulary and formulaic sequences, not on grammar. Grammar evolves gradually out of communicative need and this can be catered for in TBLT by gradually increasing the complexity of tasks. Also, I have argued that there is a case for including the teaching of grammar – just not initially, rather later after a basis in communicative skills has been established.

**M.J.R:** SLA evidence suggests that a focus on form can be beneficial in TBL. How do we know when a learner can benefit from a focus on form? How can a focus on form be engineered without losing sight of the communicative nature of language?

R.E: We do know that focus on form<sup>6</sup> during a task assists learning. There are a whole host of studies that have investigated corrective feedback when students are performing tasks that shows that learning (in the sense of greater accuracy) results. Corrective feedback need not (and indeed has been shown not to) interfere

with the communicative flow of a task. To my mind, corrective feedback is crucial. It is part of TBLT.

**M.J.R: Input is central in SLA - will the input my learners get in completing tasks be good enough to trigger/facilitate language acquisition? In other words, most of the input learners receive in TBL comes from other learners and therefore it is full of grammatical errors. Is this input good enough for language acquisition?**

R.E: Wrong! Input can come from listening and reading tasks. It is a mistake to assume that TBLT always involves students working in pairs and groups. In Prabhu's version of TBLT, there was no pair/group work at all. Tasks provide an opportunity for the teacher to provide interesting, comprehensible input. Indeed, this is how TBLT should start off.

**M.J.R: Finally, I would appreciate a conclusion or your views on any key issue that has not been raised in this interview.**

R.E: Well, you have raised all the key issues – and the objections raised about TBLT. One final point – TBLT is likely to be a lot more motivating for students than traditional grammar teaching. Language is not an *object* to be broken up into bits. It is a tool. TBLT provides a means of allowing students to do with language what comes naturally to them – use it as a tool to achieve their communicative purposes.

**M.J.R: Thank you very much for your time, along with many stimulating insights into language teaching. I am sure this interview will encourage many teachers, teacher trainers, and researchers to look more closely at TBL. And most importantly, it will support/motivate them in their efforts to implement TBL pedagogy in their teaching.**

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Rod Ellis kindly accepted our request for an interview that was completed in Granada by Manuel Jiménez Raya.
- <sup>2</sup> Arguably, Dewey was the most influential thinker in education in the twentieth century. His contribution lies along several fronts. Dewey's thoughts on experience and reflection, democracy and community, and to environments for learning have all been seminal. Dewey thought there is a close connection between education and social action in a democracy. "*Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife*", Dewey wrote in *School and Society*, published in 1889. Dewey believed that school should teach students how to be problem-solvers by helping them learn how to think rather than simply learning rote lessons about large amounts of information. Schools should focus on **judgment** rather than **knowledge**, so that children become adults who can "*pass judgments pertinently and discriminatingly on the problems of human living*" (Campbell, 1995: 215-216). Dewey also believed that schools should help students learn to live and to work cooperatively with others, promoting exploration and growth. Dewey proposed that education be designed on the basis of a **theory of experience**. We must understand the nature of how humans have the experiences they do in order to design effective education. In this respect, Dewey's theory of experience rested on two central tenets: continuity and interaction.
- <sup>3</sup> As shown by early research into naturalistic L2 acquisition, the idea that what teachers teach is what learners learn, and when we teach it is when learners learn it, is not only simplistic, but wrong. Acquisition sequences do not mirror teaching sequences, and *teachability* is constrained by *learnability* (Pienemann, 1984). In the SLA literature, we can find strong evidence for different kinds of developmental sequences and stages in interlanguage development, such as the six-stage sequence for English relative clauses (Doughty, 1991), the four-stage sequence for ESL negation (Pica, 1983), and many other grammatical areas. These sequences cannot be altered by teaching, in the sense that it is impossible to make learners skip stages or alter them altogether (Ellis, 1989).
- <sup>4</sup> Implicit knowledge is procedural, is held unconsciously and cannot be verbalized unless it is made explicit. It is accessed rapidly and easily and thus is readily available for use in fluent communication.
- <sup>5</sup> Presentation-Practice-Production. The PPP approach assumes that it is possible to lead learners from controlled to automatic use of new language features by asking students to do text-manipulation exercises that provide a structure to language for the learner. Language is viewed in PPP as a series of products that can be acquired sequentially.
- <sup>6</sup> In Applied Linguistics, focus on form refers only to those form-focused activities that arise during, and embedded in, meaning-based lessons; they are not planned in advance, as is the case with focus on forms, but occur incidentally as a function of the interaction of learners with the subject matter or tasks that constitute the learners' and their teacher's predominant focus. The main purpose is to induce noticing, that is, for further second language (L2) development, learners have to notice/register the L2 features in the input so as to store them in memory.

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