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## **Guest Editorial**

### **Task-Based Language Teaching and Learning**

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Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) constitutes both an innovative language teaching method and a thriving area of investigation in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The past three decades have witnessed a surge of interest in TBLT which is evidenced by numerous published monographs, edited volumes, and articles and special issues in major SLA and Language Teaching journals (Ahmadian and García Mayo forthcoming; Bygate 2016; Ellis 2003; García Mayo, 2007 to name but a few). This growing interest could be in part ascribed to the inherent qualities of tasks; namely, having a primary focus on meaning, inducing learners to draw on their linguistic and cognitive resources, and being outcome oriented in the sense that learners are required to use language to accomplish some sort of real-world activity (telling a story, solving a problem, giving directions, etc.) (Ellis 2003). These characteristics have rendered tasks indispensable instruments for not only teaching and assessing languages but also for researching into language learning processes. In other words, tasks pervade many aspects of language teaching research and practice but they may take on different forms and could be used under various guises – i.e. real-world tasks which promote situational authenticity or pedagogic tasks which foster interactional authenticity in the classroom (see Bygate this issue). TBLT is now construed as a very broad area of enquiry and there are obviously scores of debated topics from different vantage points which are worth exploration (see Ahmadian and García Mayo, forthcoming). This makes it somewhat difficult to keep abreast of all recent developments in TBLT. Therefore, it should be acknowledged that whilst adopting a fairly broad perspective on TBLT, this special issue addresses only a fraction of such significant issues.

In the opening paper, Martin Bygate provides an exhaustive overview of the origins of TBLT as well as recent key developments in this area. He argues that TBLT has, in part, emerged out of the need for language educators to help learners with both acquiring the knowledge of language and honing their skills and abilities to use their knowledge in real-world activities. Bygate makes a case for three main approaches to the adoption of TBLT: (a) task-supported approach, which involves using tasks to support or complement the existing approaches, (b) task-referenced approach, in which tasks are utilised to characterise the abilities which language learners are supposed to develop by the end of the course, and (c) task-based approach, in which, as Bygate states, ‘the programme is created in terms of a sequence of tasks with the central learning and teaching processes for all the units deriving directly from the tasks themselves, rather than by initial selection of language priorities’. He then elaborates on the main elements of task-based approaches, namely needs analysis, the three-phase procedure (pre-task, on-task and post-task), the discovery-based element, and the project-based nature of TBLT. Finally, Bygate reviews recent findings in TBLT research from cognitive and socio-cognitive perspectives and stresses the need for a symbiotic relationship between practice and research. This latter suggestion is in alignment with Long’s

(2015: 369) argument that for TBLT, as an innovative approach, to catch on and spread, early involvement of teachers and practical demonstrations are in order.

In the second paper, Zohreh Eslami and Wan-Tsai Kung adopt a task-based perspective to examine the occurrence of Language-Related Episodes (LREs) between learners in different dyadic types (NS-NNS vs. NNS-NNS). This research has been carried out in the context of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) which makes it particularly appealing. As Ziegler (2016: 136) suggests, a reciprocal relationship between TBLT and CALL has developed over the years and the researchers interested in tasks and technology have sought to ‘not only examine how technology might support and facilitate language learning, but how TBLT might serve as a framework to more thoroughly investigate CALL’. Eslami and Kung’s quasi-experimental research shows that the effectiveness of incidental focus-on-form can be measured through individualised testing of linguistic items and that research on incidental focus-on-form does not have to remain descriptive or exploratory in nature. Obviously, this research opens up a new avenue of research which will further shed light on how incidental focus-on-form affects L2 development. For example, the authors suggest that other task types, such as information-gap and problem-solving tasks, may have different effects on L2 learners and result in different findings.

The next contribution, by Zhisheng (Edward) Wen, looks into the interaction between working memory (WM) and task-based planning and performance. WM is now considered as a cornerstone of cognitive psychology and during the past ten years or so SLA researchers have turned their attention to the pivotal role of this cognitive mechanism in second language learning and performance. Whilst several studies have examined whether and how task design features and implementation conditions interact with working memory capacity, virtually all of them have used general measures and conceptualizations of working memory. Wen’s research, however, uses finer-grained measures and is framed within Phonological/Executive Hypothesis (proposed by Wen) which, as befits the name, zeros in on two specific components of WM. Although Wen’s results do not point to any statistically significant relationship between participants’ PSTM and L2 performance measures, they clearly demonstrate that participants’ EWM was significantly correlated with some lexical, syntactic and stylistic features of L2 speech performance. This research constitutes an original and innovative contribution in that very few previous studies, either in the field of cognitive psychology or in SLA, have set out to directly compare and investigate simultaneously the distinctive effects of phonological short term memory and executive working memory on L2 task-based speech performance in different planning conditions.

In paper four, Vahid Parvaresh and Mohammad Javad Ahmadian explore the effects of task design (operationalized as task structure) on the production of vague expressions (e.g. or something, five-ish, and that sort of thing, etc.) by EFL learners. So far, scores of studies have attempted to investigate the impacts of task difficulty (or structure), task complexity, and task-based implementation conditions (planning time, etc.) on L2 performance but virtually all these studies have used complexity, accuracy, lexis, and fluency (CALF) as dependent variables (see Ellis 2009 for an excellent review). This study could be considered as one of the first attempts at investigating whether and how task structure impacts upon pragmatic aspects of language. Although the use of vague expressions in conversation might, at first sight, appear to be an undesirable phenomenon, research findings suggest that vague language is frequently used by native speakers. Results of this study reveals that unstructured tasks induce learners to produce vague expressions more frequently.

In paper five, Maria del Pilar García Mayo and Ainara Imaz Agirre investigate a fairly under-researched area within TBLT. They examine the effects of two different implementation conditions (same task vs. procedural task repetition) on the strategies that young learners' use for negotiation of meaning. They also explore the effects of task repetition on pair dynamics. During the past two decades, since the publication of Bygate's (1996) study, task repetition has attracted increasing attention, but as authors rightly point out very few studies have considered changes in young participants. To unravel the changes in pair dynamics, García Mayo and Imaz Agirre adopt a socio-cultural perspective and draw on Storch's model to describe the collaborative patterns. The results of this study did not reveal any significant difference in terms of negotiation of meaning strategies from time 1 to time 2; however, data analysis with reference to Storch's model pointed to the positive effects of task repetition on collaborative patterns. For instance, the authors report that procedural task repetition directly affects changing dyadic patterns from passive/parallel at Time 1 to collaborative pattern at Time 2.

In the next contribution, Laura Gurzynski-Weiss adopts a novel perspective to further investigate task complexity. In this research, Gurzynski-Weiss first trains eight graduate student instructors of Spanish in light of recent research on task complexity and sequencing and then examines: (a) how novice teachers interpret theoretical ideas and empirical findings, and (b) whether and how they incorporate this research into their teaching practices. The results of this study reveal that graduate student instructors utilised the research results presented in training when operationalising cognitive complexity and determining task sequencing. These findings provide further support for the idea that effective language teacher training has a direct bearing on teachers' engagement with research.

The seventh paper, Chihiro Inoue focuses on measures of syntactic complexity and accuracy which are extensively used in TBLT literature. As Housen, Kuiken and Vedder (2012: 2) point out, 'CAF has started to figure as central foci for investigation in their own right [and] the status of CAF as principal [...] dimensions of L2 performance and proficiency has now been justified both empirically and theoretically'. Inoue's research is an attempt towards this direction and has two main objectives: first, it examines the variables which are conventionally used to measure syntactic complexity in order to identify which may be the best indicators of different proficiency levels, and second, it aims to identify the most valid measure for accuracy. Results of the study show that the most robust measure for tapping into accuracy is errors per 100 words.

In the eighth and final paper, Rob Batstone addresses an important issue which has been somewhat neglected in much of TBLT research, namely the important role of context in the realization of negotiation of form. Batstone's argument hinges on a distinction that he has made between 'learning discourse' – i.e. a discourse which involves engaging with language form as its overriding purpose – and 'communicative discourse' – in which 'linguistic form is used as the main vehicle towards attaining a communicative end' (Batstone 2005: 287). He provides evidence and theoretical argument that negotiation of form is most efficiently achieved through 'learning discourse' rather than 'communicative discourse'. Batstone's paper opens up some new avenues of research and calls for further empirical research to test the speculative, but cogent, arguments that it makes.

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