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The TBLT Approach: What it is and How to Implement it in Catalan Secondary Schools

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Abstract

As a result of the ineffectiveness of mainstream language teaching methodologies, L2 learners often feel discouraged and frustrated with the target language. This paper claims that the Task-Based approach to Language Teaching (TBLT) could reverse this situation by means of task-based lessons that aim at increasing students' motivation to learn incidentally using their own resources to perform meaning-oriented communicative 'tasks'. Our study departs from a careful analysis of TBLT's theoretical foundations, main aims and methodology, which includes the definition of the term 'task' and its pragmatic classification according to the learners' level of proficiency and the lesson format. Likewise, a final proposal for the implementation of TBLT principles in EFL teaching in Catalan secondary education shows how the Catalan foreign language curriculum clearly caters for TBLT and even for technology-mediated TBLT. However, in order to put into practice the task-based approach as suggested, the government's collaboration is needed to modify teacher training and materials.

Keywords: TBLT, task-based approach, language teaching methodology, language learning, motivation, communicative competency, SLA

1. Introduction

> "If communication is THE aim, then it should be THE major element in the process" (Allwright 1979, p. 167, emphasis in original).

Teaching a foreign language is always a challenge, especially when the students are teenagers who are not motivated to learn a new language since they think they will never use it in real life. Not to mention the lack of confidence most of them show when asked to speak or write in the given language, and their blind faith in online translators to solve their linguistic doubts. These are some of the difficulties English teachers face in high schools across Catalonia despite the great emphasis that the Catalan curriculum places on acquiring communicative competency in the context of a global and technological society (Currículum educació secundària obligatòria: Àmbit lingüístic (llengües estrangeres), DOGC, 2015). This situation certainly reveals the ineffectiveness of the current methodologies, which are mainly based on the systematization and memorization of English, and the need for a shift in mainstream language teaching towards a more communicative centered approach, as Allwright suggested (1979, p. 167).

With that in mind, many scholars claim that Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is the best solution to the problems previously stated, for it is a language teaching approach that aims at enhancing students' motivation and natural skills to learn incidentally by means of tasks which have a clear, engaging and practical communicative outcome (Ellis, 2009, 2019; Willis & Willis, 1996). Despite having received criticism by numerous supporters of the traditional approach, TBLT is gaining popularity as many teachers and educators are increasingly recognizing its benefits and supporting its implementation in state education course syllabi (Ellis, 2009, p. 222). However, TBLT has not been carefully examined as a viable methodology to apply in secondary schools yet, for a variety of reasons ranging from the size of groups to the lack of teaching materials. Hence, this study precisely analyses TBLT's origins, main aims and methodology in order to suggest ways to put it into effect in Catalan high schools with the help of technology. Furthermore, it includes several examples of tasks, possible lesson structures and course assessment strategies so as to provide a suitable framework that facilitates the implementation of the task-based approach in the classroom.

2. What is TBLT?

2.1 Origins and main aims

Throughout the history of teaching methodology in Europe there have been two major revolutionary reactions to the teaching status quo: the Reform movement in the late 19th century, which challenged the grammar-translation approach, and the Communicative Approach in the mid to the late 20th century, which challenged the structural-based approach (Thornbury, 2011; Bygate, 2015).

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach rejected the traditional view that language teaching should be based on the study of formal structures, for it viewed language as a means of communication and thus attempted to contextualize learning activities within authentic communication between learners, teachers, text and the outside the class world (e.g Stevick, 1996; Widdowson, 1978). In fact, it was the notion of "communicative competence" that gave the communicative approach its name, as it alluded to the knowledge about "when to speak, when not and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner" (Hymes, 1971, p. 277). Then, Howatt (1984) differentiated a weak and a strong version of CLT. Basically, their divergence resided in the fact that the selection of syllabus objectives in the weak version was based on "linguistic realizations of notions and functions" (Ellis, 2018, p. 5) but the methodological focus remained essentially in accuracy, whereas in the strong version the teaching content was defined in terms of communicative tasks, and fluency was the methodological goal. Although the structural-based syllabi were still deeply rooted to mainstream language teaching (Bygate, 2015, p. 384), the first proposals of TBLT implemented many of the strong version of CLT principles (see Prabhu's Bangalore Project, 1987).

Meanwhile, SLA research in the 1960s and 1970s increasingly challenged behaviorist theories of learning previously put forward. For instance, researchers found that there was a common acquisitional order for all L2 learners regardless of their L1 or age (Dulay & Burt, 1973). They also observed that learners worked on achieving several target structures at the same time -not in a linear fashion, meaning there will be differences amongst learners with regards to what they are ready to learn (Corder, 1967). In addition, some studies suggested that language learning involves not only the learning of forms but also their diverse meanings and contexts of use (Bygate, 2015, p. 384). Likewise, constructivism understood that "the sense that learners themselves seek to make of their

worlds, and the cognitive or mental processes that they bring to the task of learning" are fundamental for the learning process as teacher and learner can co-construct meaning together (Williams and Burden, 1997, p. 12). All these findings emphasized the importance of engaging learners "with form, meaning and use in real time for real purposes and with real interlocutors who want and need to understand each other" (Bygate, 2015, p. 385).

In recent decades, on the mid to the late 1980s, the task-based approach to language teaching came into existence drawing on the strong version of the Communicative Language Teaching movement (CLT) and latest Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research and theory (Ellis, 2018, p. 8). Therefore, Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) contrasts with traditional approaches in that "it is based on the principle that language learning will progress most successfully if teaching aims simply to create contexts in which the learner's natural language learning capacity can be nurtured", rather than considering language "an object to be systematically taught and intentionally learned" -as it is considered in structural-based syllabus approaches (Ellis, 2003, pp. 4, 5; 2009, p. 222). TBLT creates these contexts to teach language incidentally by means of 'tasks' in which students need to apply their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources to fill in a given gap and achieve a communicative outcome (Ellis, 2009, 2018). Furthermore, the methodological focus in this approach is not form, but meaning -i.e. "conceptual meanings that mediate thinking" (Couper, 2015, p. 417). Hence, tasks are considered a key element for language learning and mastering, for they help learners to understand and develop language holistically (Bygate, 2015, p. 386). These aspects of TBLT will be further analyzed in the next sections.

2.2 What is a 'task' and how does it differ from an 'exercise'?

A task is often considered to be a piece of work of a certain difficulty, but this definition is vague and inconclusive. Since tasks are "the basic organization unit of a task-based course" (Ellis, 2018, p. 9), it becomes crucial to know what the term 'task' particularly means in TBLT and in what ways it is different from an 'exercise' in traditional approaches.

Scholars have provided a great number of definitions of tasks. For instance, Breen described them as "a structured plan for the provision of opportunities for the refinement

of knowledge and capabilities entailed in a new language and its use during communication" (1989, p. 187). Nunan (1989) also emphasizes that a task should "stand alone as a communicative act in its own right" and compel learners to focus on meaning over form, whereas Long (1985) defines tasks as "the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between", meaning that they may resemble real life activities. Likewise, Willis explains the meaning of 'task' as "a goal-oriented activity" in which learners use whatever target language resources they have in order to achieve a "real outcome", that is, "to solve a problem, do a puzzle, play a game, or share and compare experiences" (Willis, 1996, p. 53).

However, Ellis criticizes definitions as such because they meld two senses of 'task', both the language learning goals -process- and to the materials used for tasks -workplan. He argues that for the sake of course design, tasks should be regarded only as a workplan, for it is hardly possible to predict specific learning results in TBLT (Ellis, 2009, 2018). This assumption also "embodies the attempt to create a context for the communicative and purposive use of the L2" (Ellis, 2018, p. 12). Thus, Ellis claims that a given 'activity' must satisfy four criteria so as to be considered a 'task', as seen in Table 1 below: 1) its primary focus should be on meaning; 2) there has to be some kind of gap; 3) it needs to require from learners to use their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources; and 4) it has a communicative outcome (Ellis, 2003, pp. 4, 5). In view of its practicality, this is the definition of task I will assume throughout the paper.

Table 1. Criteria for defining a task-as-a-workplan (Ellis & Shintani, 2014 as cited in Ellis, 2018, p. 12)

Criteria	Description
1	The workplan's goal is to ensure that learners comprehend or/and produce messages for a communicative outcome.
2	The workplan's design includes a gap which can be filled by means of conveying information, reasoning or sharing an opinion.
3	The workplan does not incorporate direct teaching of any target language although it may provide some valuable input for the performance of the task. Learners need to understand and produce language items according to their own linguistic and non-linguistic resources (e.g. gestures, facial expressions).

4	The workplan clearly states the communicative outcome of the task. This way, learners can be assessed in consonance with whether they have accomplished the communicative outcome or not.

These four criteria were recently exemplified by Ellis (2020). In the task seen in Figure 1, the teacher describes the location of the invented places list, and the students must write the names of these places into the map. Once they finish, the teacher shows or tells students the answers and they correct them. We can consider it a task because it satisfies the four criteria previously mentioned: 1) there is a primary focus on meaning because students need to understand the teacher's descriptions; 2) there is some kind of gap since the teacher knows the location of the list of places but students do not, so they have to pay attention to discover it; 3) students need to use their own linguistic resources -in this case, their listening skills- to perform the task; and 4) there is a clear communicative outcome: the completion of the map. Notice that we can deem this activity a task for the reasons previously stated although it does not require from students to speak. This is an important remark since it is commonly thought that a task involves learners' production of language. However, as we will analyze in more depth later on, there are input-based tasks and out-based tasks and this Map Task would be an example of the first type.

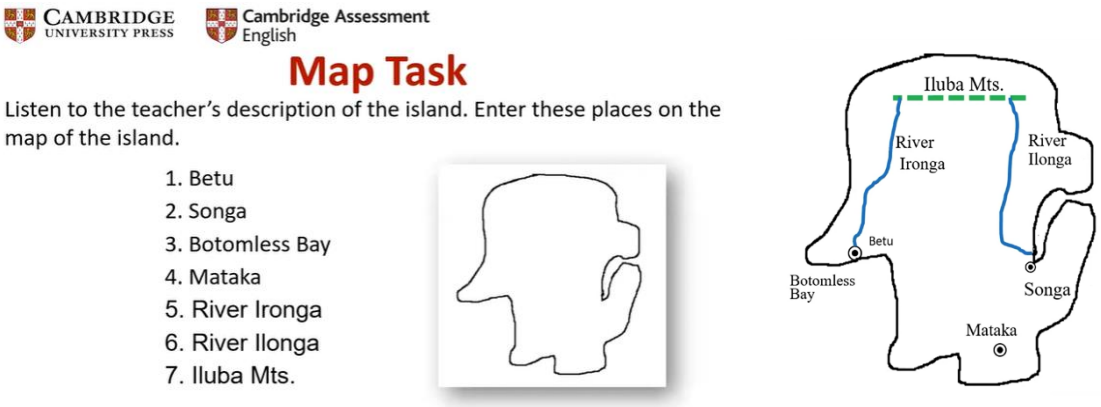

Figure 1. On the left, there is a Map Task. On the right, there is the answer key with the information that learners need to process.

On the contrary, in an activity like "Going shopping" in Figure 2, students are asked to work in pairs to make conversations following the example given. In this vein, the student with the role of Mary could say "Good morning. Do you have any eggs?", and the student with the role of Abdullah might answer: "No, I'm sorry. I don't have any eggs". This interaction cannot be viewed as a task, but as an exercise because 1) the primary focus is on using a grammatical feature correctly (e.g. 'any' or 'some'); 2) there is no gap, for students can see both lists and have all the information; 3) students do not need to use their own linguistic resources, since all the language they have to use has been already provided; and 4) there is no communicative outcome: the outcome is simply performing the dialogue and repeat it several times. This example demonstrates how exercises differ from tasks, since they are chiefly based on manipulating a given text by means of completing it or substituting pieces of information already provided, so they make students reproduce the target feature accurately.

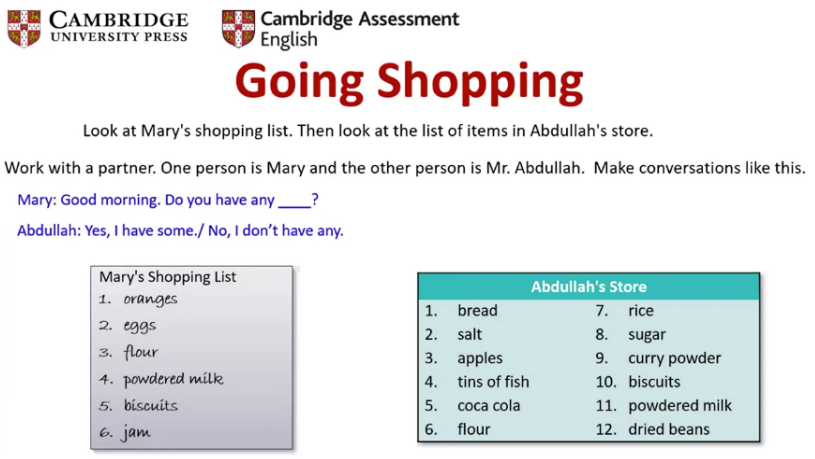

Figure 2. Going Shopping Exercise.

Figure 3. "What Can You Buy?" Task.

Nevertheless, this exercise could be easily turned into a task if Student A had a list of items to buy and Student B a list of items for sale, and they should achieve a different goal -e.g. A: find the items you can buy vs. B: find the items you cannot supply. This is shown in Figure 3. In

this fashion, throughout this activity the four criteria for defining a task would be fulfilled since 1) the emphasis is on meaning, 2) there is an information gap, 3) the students need to rely on their own linguistic abilities to achieve their respective goals, and 4) there is a clear communicative outcome: to obtain the information they want from the other student.

In short, TBLT's objectives and workplan are embodied in the form of tasks, which are meaning-oriented activities designed to provide the suitable environment for learners to achieve a communicative outcome by providing some sort of gap they need to fill with their own resources. These characteristics contrast with traditional exercises which tend to 'spoon-feed' learners and create the illusion that language only consists of a set of rules to memorize and reproduce.

2.3 How can we classify tasks?

There is no universal way of classifying tasks, yet a number of useful distinctions have emerged from research. For example, Willis and Willis (1996; 2007) determine six types of tasks according to what learners do when performing them: listing, problem solving, ordering, projects and creative tasks, sharing personal experiences, and comparing.

Nunan (1989) was the first to introduce the contrast between 'real-world tasks' and 'pedagogic tasks'. Real-world tasks have "situational authenticity", for they could be found and put into practice in real life; whereas pedagogic tasks are specially intended to be used in the classroom and generate "interactional authenticity", for they lead to a natural -and practical- use of language (Ellis, 2018, p. 13). A task where two students perform the roles of hotel receptionist and client in need of information to book a room would be a real-world task, and a Spot the Difference task would be a pedagogic one in which learners are taught to compare two items; perhaps they will not be asked to find differences between two pictures in real life but most certainly between two products, two hotel rooms, two schools, etc (Ellis, 2018, p. 178). Despite their differences, both kinds of tasks are designed to engage students in a communicative act which aims at being authentic and natural (Bygate, 2015, p. 381).

Tasks can also have more than one possible outcome –'open tasks'- or only one –'closed tasks'- and require the production of one student–'one-way communication'- or the interaction of more than one–'two-way communication'. An illustration of a two-way,

open task would be a heart-transplant task where a piece of information about several candidates is split among groups of learners that have to discuss who is the best one because there is only one donator (Ellis, 2018, 2020).

Within TBLT another distinction is made between 'here-and-now tasks' and 'there-and-then tasks'. In here-and-now tasks students have immediate access to the information needed to carry out the task, while in there-and-then tasks they do not, hence the level of difficulty increases. An example of the latter would be a map task in which the teacher does not provide the names of the places (Ellis, 2020).

In addition to this, a task could be teacher-generated or learner-generated (Lambert, Philp & Nakamura, 2017; Ellis, 2020). Teacher-generated tasks are tasks guided by the teacher. An example of this type of task would be one to be done in pairs in which Student A is given a picture and has to describe it so that Student B can draw it. After Student B has finished, the students compare their pictures. Conversely, in learner-generated tasks, learners are allowed to create the content of the task, which increases their willingness to participate in it. An example of this would be a task similar to the previous one, but different in that Student A's picture would depict an interesting -and personal- anecdote that happened to him/her once.

Additionally, Ellis (2018) advocates for a systematic way of classifying tasks in terms of whether they are input-based or output-based, focused or unfocused. Input-based tasks are tasks which do not require -but do not forbid- learners' production of language and involve reading and/or listening[1]; whereas output-based tasks do require learners' production of language by means of speaking and/or writing. Unlike unfocused tasks which are designed to examine general examples of language, focused tasks are aimed at eliciting the use of a particular linguistic feature -like a grammatical structure while their primary focus remains on meaning and achieving the task outcome. In Ellis (2003), the author defended the inclusion of focused tasks in TBLT curricula because, when not properly taught, certain linguistic features may cause some persisting major learning problems. However, this is not a point of view shared by all TBLT advocates[2].

[1] Ellis (2003) dedicates a whole chapter to examine listening and reading tasks and reviewing studies that show how this type of tasks can foster incidental vocabulary acquisition (e.g. Dupuy and Krashen, 1993; Ellis, Tanaka, and Yamazaki, 1994; Ellis and Heimbach 1997).

[2] For instance, Long (2016) and Skehan (1998) argue that focused tasks have no place in TBLT.

Having reviewed these various classifications of tasks, it is certain that "TBLT is an approach to the teaching of language in which tasks of one kind or the other are seen as essential activities for language learning" (Bygate, 2015, p. 381). So, educators need to get familiar with the different properties of tasks if they aspire to engage learners in the classroom.

3. How can we organize a TBLT course?

3.1 The format of each lesson

As it happens with any other type of language teaching, methodological decisions concerning the lesson structure must be taken in TBLT courses in order to ensure its goals. Nevertheless, there is no single way of designing a TBLT lesson structure due to a number of reasons (Ellis, 2018, p. 219). One of them is that there are three main approaches to apply TBLT principles in the classroom, so the design of the lessons will vary according to which one we choose to apply in the classroom (Bygate, 2015, pp. 387-388).

The first approach is to use tasks as a complement for traditional programs, and it has been called 'task-supported' language teaching (TSLT). In TSLT, the role of tasks is oriented towards the correct use of the TL previously taught within a communicative act, so the students' attention is conducted to a particular formal feature (Ellis, 2008, p. 197). Pinter (2007) adopted this approach to teach young learners, and East (2012) documented how it was used by New Zealand teachers to incorporate tasks into the Modern Foreign Languages curriculum. In view of the complexities of replacing entire programs from one day to the next, this approach may be the most feasible one to adopt (Bygate, 2015, p. 288). Besides, and most importantly, this approach could serve as an introductory step towards a holistic task-based lesson.

The second approach is often termed 'task-referenced' language teaching because it includes tasks as a reference for defining the target abilities that students should develop. Hence, it assumes that testing students on target tasks will eventually encourage teachers to use similar procedures in their lessons (Bygate, 2015, p. 388). An example of this approach would be the UK 'key stage' curriculum (e.g. the 'Mathematics programs of study: key stages 1 and 2 National curriculum in England', Department for Education 2013).

Lastly, the third approach is properly 'task-based' since the sequence of tasks becomes the central element of the whole learning process and, as Bygate highlights, tasks are major boosters for language learning since they provide the appropriate context "for familiar language to be activated, and for new language to be encountered, used and gradually mastered" (Bygate, 2015, p. 386). Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-von Ditfurth (2011) and van den Branden (2006) provide case studies of this approach.

The standard format for a task-based lesson was established by Willis (1996) and comprises three stages that can be performed as a whole class, in pairs, in groups, or by learners working individually: 1) 'Pre-task', which helps students to understand the topic and objectives of the task; 2) 'Task cycle' or 'main task', which includes the task, the learners' planning to solve the task, and their report; and 3) 'Post-task', which covers the analysis of results and final follow-up[3]. According to Willis (1996), this framework fulfils the four main conditions for learning implied by SLA research findings. Namely, it exposes students to a rich but comprehensible input of real language, it provides them opportunities to experiment with real language in different circumstances, it engages them in the active process of learning, and it focuses on language form in order to correctly systematize what students know (Willis, 1996, p. 59). However, TBLT advocates hold different opinions as to what is the preferred approach of each stage.

Willis (1996) considers the pre-task stage as an early exposure to language which may help students to remember suitable vocabulary and recognize new one, as well as allow them time to think and prepare what they want to communicate in the main task (Willis, 1996, p. 56). In this vein, Bygate (2015) suggests that the pre-task stage could be used as a way of leading students into discovering something they are not able to perform yet so as to increase their willingness to learn. Hence, this phase may serve to progressively engage them in delving into those meanings by attempting to express themselves, "but at the same time bringing them to realise that they lack language to do what they need to do in the task" (Bygate, 2015, p. 389). This feature would be especially valuable to deal with those students who are typically not motivated to learn, such as teenagers.

As for the 'main task' phase, Willis believes that teachers should "stand back and let learners get on the task on their own" (1996, p. 54), while Ellis (2009, 2018) and

[3] Not all task-based lessons follow Willis' three stages. Some of them consist of just the main task for it is the essential phase, or the main task combined with the pre-task or the post-task (Ellis, 2018, p. 219).

Bygate (2015) defend that the teacher's role in the TBLT approach involves more than being a manager and facilitator of tasks, for they must make sure that learners are successfully addressing the key issues of the task and help them by providing support and clarification. When doing so, teachers need to bear in mind that TBLT, unlike traditional methodologies, does not expect the same task outcomes from all learners, but rather it allows scope for displaying their own personality and capabilities in finding more than one appropriate solution to the same problem (Bygate, 2015, p. 389).

Regarding the post-task phase, Willis and Willis (2007) maintain that the emphasis on accuracy should occur at the end of the lesson since one of its functions is to provide the opportunity to reinforce students' knowledge of form-focused language features they might have struggled with in the main task. However, Estaire and Zanon (1994) propose that some grammar ought to be taught in the pre-task phase, whereas Long (2006) recommends incorporating it into the main-task phase in terms of recasts and Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen (2001) advocate for guiding learner's attention to form throughout the performance of tasks using various types of pre-emptive and reactive corrective feedback strategies. It has also been suggested that the post-task stage could include traditional practice type exercises set as homework or consciousness-raising (CR) tasks to consolidate grammar (see Willis, 1996 and Ellis, 1993, 2003). Therefore, although focusing on form is not central to TBLT, it is definitely not 'outlawed' as some scholars have wrongly claimed (e.g. Swan, 2005 and Widdowson, 2003)

Hence, we have briefly examined how flexible the design of a TBLT lesson can be in the context of a classroom. First, because there are three main ways of introducing TBLT's principles in language teaching which may account for different lesson formats, namely task-supported teaching, task-referenced teaching, and task-based teaching. Second, because the structure of a -purely- task-based lesson might consist of the pre-task phase, the main-task phase and the post-task phase, but only the main task is the essential one. Third, because the focus on form can be present in all three phases of a task-based lesson depending on the chosen criteria. Thus, there is room for adjusting TBLT principles to any kind of students, no matter what type of lesson structure we choose from the above; by the end of a task-based lesson, learners will not only have achieved a better understanding of the given language, but also a proper context for grammar learning, which is sometimes the problem in traditional approaches.

3.2 Task selection and course assessment

Long (1985, 2015) proposes that TBLT courses' syllabi should be elaborated on the basis of needs analysis, that is, according to the specific needs of a particular group of learners. Indeed, this step may be very convenient for those learners who live in a country in which the target language is necessary for daily survival. However, that is not the case of foreign language learners in state educational systems where the target language does not play a substantial role in society, for these kinds of learners do not have feasible needs to be addressed (Cameron, 2001; Ellis, 2018). That is why, instead of promoting needs-based syllabi, Estaire and Zanon (1994) recommend selecting a range of appropriate 'themes' in consonance with how relevant they are to the lives of the learners and their level of proficiency. Thus, themes closer to students' everyday lives would be more suited for beginners, whereas advanced learners could be presented with more remote themes, such as those related to science and imagination.

On another front, some scholars have argued that TBLT fails to encourage learners to improve and master the target language claiming that the performance of the tasks often results in pidginized language, which is more likely to develop fossilization rather than acquisition (e.g. Seedhouse, 1999). It is true that this method aims at creating contexts that favor learners' attempts to communicate "using whatever resources at their disposal", and hence many of them might be limited in their interactions at first because of their learning environment and/or level of competency (Ellis, 2009, p. 230). Still, that does not mean they will not progress towards proficiency levels. For instance, Ellis (2009) suggests that "TBLT might in fact be better suited to 'acquisition-poor' environments than to 'acquisition-rich' ones" since it provides communicative opportunities that cannot be found outside the classroom in many European and Asian countries (Ellis, 2009, p. 238). As for the handicap involving low competence in the L2, TBLT supporters advocate the gradual increase in task-difficulty in the design of a course syllabus so that the lessons can be reasonably challenging for learners of different levels of competency (see Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis, 2011).

Although it is hardly possible to identify and predict which specific factors determine the complexity of a task, research has shown that its implementation and design features are main determinants (Ellis, 2020). Hence, the inclusion of pedagogic input-based tasks, unfocused tasks, closed tasks, and here-and-now tasks is especially beneficial

for beginners or students with low procedural proficiency (Shintani, 2016; Prabhu, 1987), since these types of tasks facilitate L2 acquisition by exposing them to meaningful input to help them learn to comprehend the language (Ellis, 2009, p. 238). Later on, the progressive addition of output-based tasks, focused tasks, real-life tasks, open tasks and there-and-then tasks can help intermediate learners to develop a basic competence of the given language and improve those areas with which they struggle (Swain, 1985; Ellis, 2020). These kinds of tasks supply the key stimulus for second language acquisition: better opportunities for the negotiation of meaning (Long, 1996), form (Lyster, 2001) and 'languaging'[4] (Swain, 2006). Finally, in the case of more advanced learners the focus should be on mainly real-life, output-based, focused, open and there-and-then tasks, by reason of increasing the level of complexity in tasks will lead to linguistically enriched communication and proficiency in the given language (Ellis, 2009, 2020). This classification of tasks best suited for learners is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Suiting the task type to the learner (based on Ellis, 2020)

Type of learner	Type of task
Beginner learners	Pedagogic input-based tasks; closed tasks; here-and-now tasks
Intermediate learners	Pedagogic input-based and output-based tasks; some focused tasks; some real-life tasks; both closed and open and here-and-now and there-and-then tasks
Advanced learners	Mainly output-based tasks; focused tasks; real-life tasks; mainly open and there-and-then tasks

Nevertheless, as Ellis (2003) suggested, the final decision on what the appropriate type and level of task is for a specific group of learners corresponds to the teachers -or the designers of TBLT courses, who should make use of research findings, as well as their own experience and intuitions.

Another issue regarding the TBLT method is task assessment. Many educational systems around the world emphasize knowledge-learning over skill-development in their

[4] 'Languaging' is a term introduced by Swain (2006) which refers to the use of dialogue as a "socially constructed cognitive tool" that supports second language learning "by mediating its own construction, and the construction of knowledge about itself" (Swain, 2000, p. 112).

examinations, so traditional tests are employed to make sure students primarily learn new vocabulary and grammar (Ellis, 2009, p. 242). Even to obtain better job positions, it is necessary to pass official exams which follow the traditional format (e.g. PET, FCE, IELTS). TBLT is not compatible with such approach and does not use exams to test students' improvement, but rather it evaluates their performance of tasks. One way of doing so is repeating a given task some time later and observing whether the second time they have been able to do better than the first time in terms of range of vocabulary or degree of control over their L2 (Ellis, 2019, 2020). Another suggestion to verify students' progress is to ask students to keep a record of what they learn throughout the course and set worksheets as homework to confirm their development, since the classroom should be a place to experience language and not mechanically reproduce it on paper (Ellis, 2019). In this fashion, it is noteworthy that the task-based approach to language teaching enables teachers to detect whether learners are able to communicate in the target language right on the spot, and not after periodic formal examinations. Since the students' strong and weak points in the L2 will be apparent during their performance of the task, educators will be in a better position to teach more effectively than in traditional course assessments.

4. How to implement TBLT in EFL teaching in Catalan high schools?

4.1 Current situation

Many English teachers in Catalan high schools struggle with students' lack of motivation and confidence when asked to communicate in English due to a number of reasons. For instance, some teenagers think they will never use English in real life since the official languages in Catalonia are Catalan, Occitan and Spanish -not English (Estatuto de Autonomía de Cataluña, 2006). In addition, new technological developments seem to have made teenagers believe any L1-L2 linguistic problem can be solved by using online translators, hence they do not feel they need to 'learn' English as these tools will do the hard work for them. Difficulties as such reveal the ineffectiveness of the current methodologies applied to language teaching and the need to implement a new approach to effectively engage teenagers in the process of learning while developing their communicative competence. For the reasons previously stated throughout this paper, TBLT is likely to be the solution to the problem. However, it has not been carefully examined as a viable methodology to apply to Catalan secondary schools yet, mainly because many educators fear

that TBLT cannot overcome problems such as the size of the groups in secondary education and the lack of task-based teaching materials, which could compromise class management and assessment, among other aspects. That is why, in the following sections we will consider some of the main objectives according to the Catalan foreign language teaching curriculum and see how TBLT would be totally compatible with them.

4.2 Proposal

Out of the eleven competencies that the Catalan foreign language teaching curriculum establishes, three of them are directed to the same goals as TBLT, namely, oral communicative skills and outcomes: 1) oral comprehension, 2) oral production, and 3) oral interaction (Currículum educació secundària obligatòria: Àmbit lingüístic (llengües estrangeres), DOGC, 2015, p. 45). Thus, we will examine these three to ascertain TBLT's role to play in secondary education.

The first competence is oral comprehension, which the Catalan curriculum defines as the following:

> "Ser competent en la comprensió de textos orals en llengua estrangera implica obtenir la informació explicita i rellevant, interpretar-la i inferir el sentit global dels missatges. A més, suposa disposar d'una base lingüística adequada per comprendre els missatges, reconèixer els registres i les varietats socials i geogràfiques i interpretar els elements prosòdics i no verbals." (p. 45)

Notice that one of the strategies suggested to gain oral comprehension is to identify words or key expressions within the 'message' -spoken or written- to grasp the meaning of the whole text, which is in line with the aims of input-based tasks in TBLT. As we analyzed in sections 2.2 and 2.3, input-based tasks such as Map tasks (see Figure 1) involve reading and/or listening to fill in an information gap while their main focus remains on meaning. Hence, this type of tasks can contribute greatly to achieve a better understanding of English as a foreign language in accordance with the Catalan curriculum objectives. Furthermore, the curriculum alludes to enhancing learners' own resources so that they can eventually recognize, interpret and comprehend the given messages. This aspect is also addressed by TBLT, which sustains that learners' linguistic and non-linguistic resources to process messages can be developed thanks to the gradual increase in task-difficulty, among other factors (see Table 2). Since it is expected that students' level of proficiency

will be low when beginning secondary education, the use of pedagogic input-based tasks, unfocused tasks, closed tasks, and here-and-now tasks could serve them at first to build up oral comprehension while engaging them in authentic and practical communicative acts.

The second competence related to oral communication is oral production:

> "Ser competent en la producció oral suposa ser capaç d'expressar fets i coneixements, opinions i sentiments, de manera comprensible per al receptor. […] Aquesta competència implica parlar en públic dins i fora de l'aula, per la qual cosa s'ha de proporcionar a l'alumnat un entorn lingüísticament ric amb estímuls que el convidin a fer ús de la paraula, practicant l'accentuació prosòdica, la pronunciació, l'entonació i la pausa, i l'assaig (que no memorització) abans de la presentació en públic." (p.47)

The Catalan curriculum for EFL points out the need for providing learners with a proper context –"entorn lingüísticament ric amb estímuls"- to convey their thoughts paying attention to meaning, form and delivery. However, conventional teaching approaches which supply the same activity for a group of heterogeneous students hardly ever motivate students owing to the fact that not all of them have the same circumstances and level of proficiency. Moreover, traditional methods have been proved to be counterproductive since, as a result of failing to engage students in active learning, teenagers often disconnect from the lesson, feel hopeless at English and could end up frustrated for the rest of their lives.

That situation could be easily avoided in TBLT, where tasks are designed to supply the appropriate environment to stimulate learners to achieve a communicative outcome by providing some sort of gap they need to fill with their own resources (see Table 1). For instance, a type of task that is likely to increase learners' willingness to engage in the lesson is a learner-generated task to be done in pairs or small groups where Student A describes a picture which illustrates a personal funny anecdote to the other(s), who will have to draw it. After the latter has finished, the students compare their pictures and comment on the results. Additionally, tasks can be sequenced according to the task complexity model to make sure all students, no matter their competence, follow the lesson and learn something new every day. The incorporation of more demanding tasks in terms of negotiation of meaning, form and social interaction (e.g. output-based tasks, focused tasks, real-life tasks) is highly recommended to provide learners with better opportunities to improve and master the language. Furthermore, if the task-based approach were put into

practice in high schools, students would no longer feel the disheartening pressure to change their natural speech to sound better educated and obtain higher marks, for any effective oral production would be assessed positively. Besides, since TBLT evaluates learner's progress by means of their performance of tasks -and not formal exams, they will feel more at ease during the lessons, while teachers will be in a better position to address their weak and strong points than in traditional methods of assessment (see Section 3.2).

Lastly, the third competence relevant for the oral communication dimension is oral interaction:

> "La interacció oral o conversa en la llengua estrangera té un paper fonamental en la millora de l'aprenentatge de la llengua. La construcció de significat per part de dos o més parlants comporta negociar els continguts de les seves interaccions i la forma. […] La interacció implica:
>
> - La cooperació en la negociació dels significats.
> - La negociació de la forma.
> - L'aplicació d'estratègies d'autocorrecció i correcció per part d'altres." (p. 49)

It is noteworthy that oral interaction is usually disregarded in Catalan secondary education mainly because of the fear it could easily turn the classroom into chaos with large groups of teenagers. Nevertheless, as we saw in the theoretical framework in Section 2.1 and it is mentioned in the Catalan curriculum, the negotiation of form through social cooperation needs to be part of the learning process since it really is a fundamental step towards language acquisition. That is why TBLT promotes its inclusion in the course syllabi in terms of 'languaging' (Swain, 2006), i.e., the use of dialogue as a cognitive tool that boosts language learning through the mediation of language construction and knowledge. However, TBLT does not support the traditional way in which oral interaction is pushed into the lesson without a proper context or purpose, often ending up in mayhem. Instead, TBLT advocates incidental teaching by dint of tasks that give an adequate framework for grammar learning and have a clear communicative goal. An example of the latter would be a charity task where students organized in small groups share a piece of information about several charities in need of money and have to agree on which one deserves the sum they administer. Once they have reached a decision, the teacher could give some feedback and propose a follow-up debate with the representatives of each group. This

activity could be not only practical and enriching for learning, but also fun and engaging for the students.

Apropos to how the task-based approach could help to realize the aims of the Catalan curriculum related to oral communication, in each area of competence there is a constant allusion to the need for "entorns de treball digital per a l'aprenentatge col·laboratiu" that technology-mediated TBLT could satisfy (Currículum educació secundària obligatòria: Àmbit lingüístic (llengües estrangeres), DOGC, 2015, e.g. pp. 47, 49). Although it is a field of study still under-researched, many educators have tackled the implementation of technology-enhanced TBLT in the context of the classroom and curriculum and have concluded that students could benefit from it for the target language acquired with the help of technology resembles more closely the digital reality of our current lives (e.g. Blake, 2011; Sauro, 2011). In fact, as Ziegler (2016) and Prensky (2001) acknowledge, virtually all of today's learners have been raised amid technology dominance "with increasing use of multimodal combinations of mobile phone applications, text messaging, and social and visual media for learning" (2016, p. 136), so their preferences are intrinsically attached to technology. Therefore, EFL learning and teaching in Catalan high schools within the framework of TBLT should also incorporate technology in their lessons as it influences "learners' degree of interconnectedness and multitasking, as well as how they process and interact with their learning environment" (Ziegler, 2016, p. 137).

In addition to this, González-Lloret and Ortega (2014) claim that the implementation of technology-mediated tasks "can enable students to meet other speakers of the language in remote locations, opening up transformative exposure to authentic language environments and cultural enactments, along with tremendous additional sources of input" (p. 4). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic we have seen -and still see- how difficult it is for traditional methodologies to deal with the sudden and unexpected learning and teaching realities mainly because they are not as flexible as other modern approaches such as TBLT. However, this pandemic has also made evident that regular online meetings between teachers and students were feasible and overall effective in many countries. Thus, I contend those experiences could be used to organize a new model of course syllabi in which everyday task-based lessons were complemented by periodical videocalls with other European countries via Zoom or Google meetings for a term or a year-length TBLT project. For instance, teachers could ask at the beginning of the course what would students want to find out from a person from a given country (e.g. how to find a job in a

certain country or how to take the public transport in a certain city) and divide the topics, countries and/or cities into pairs or groups of six students from the different participating countries (e.g. two Spanish, two Polish and two Turkish). Then, teachers could set up meeting every two or three weeks so that students could use the meantime to discover or practice new useful language to convey their thoughts better. This way, students would probably be more willing to engage in the learning process as they could test their English skills in real conditions and with real people they would like to communicate with. At the end of the project, students could also be asked to deliver an oral presentation to summarize their task's highlights and results.

Therefore, we have examined how the Catalan foreign language curriculum for secondary education caters for Task-based Language Teaching and even for technology-mediated TBLT. Nevertheless, if their principles are to be put into practice, the government's aid is needed as it should make sure that teacher training programs, classroom materials and assessment are task-based oriented.

5. Conclusion

This paper has appraised the practical value of Task-based Language Teaching by analyzing its sources, main goals and methodological structure. In the first section, we briefly examined the theoretical foundations of TBLT and the ways in which it dissents from traditional approaches. For instance, we considered their opposing objectives and work-plans, i.e., while structured-based methodologies are mostly based on traditional exercises which consist in mechanically reproducing the target linguistic element accurately as if language competence could be systematized and memorized, TBLT makes use of tasks to provide students with the appropriate environment for learning incidentally and developing their level of proficiency starting with their own resources. We also acknowledged different types of tasks which may result useful provided that teachers become familiar with their characteristics to be able to exploit their full potential to engage learners in the lesson. For example, learner-generated tasks where learners are allowed to create the content of the task can boost teenagers' willingness to take part in it, which is an issue in secondary school education.

In the second section, we delved into how flexible task-based lesson structures and course organization can be. We reviewed the three main ways of introducing TBLT's

principles in language teaching, namely task-supported teaching, task-referenced teaching, and task-based teaching, as well as the format of the lesson in the latter model, which could involve a pre-task stage, a main-task stage and a post-task stage, although only the main-task one would be indispensable. Moreover, we clarified that TBLT is not an approach that disregards form, as some scholars have criticized, but aims at creating a proper context for grammar learning that leads to a better understanding of the target language. TBLT achieves so by tailoring the themes and tasks of the course syllabus to the lives and level of proficiency of the students. Hence, the gradual increase in task-difficulty and theme-remoteness may result in lessons that are more likely to appeal all kinds of students and make them progress in their communicative ability. In addition to this, the task-based approach to language teaching provides the means to assess and witness learners' improvements and persisting problems during their performance of the task, and not after traditional examinations.

Finally, in the third section, we analyzed how EFL teaching in Catalan secondary schools could benefit greatly from implementing TBLT methodology, not only in terms of enhancing students' motivation but also in terms of facilitating class management and fostering communicative competence. Furthermore, technology-mediated TBLT might help students born in the digital era to learn English in a more familiar and interactive way than through conventional textbooks. Therefore, as I suggested, students may be more inclined to engage in everyday task-based lessons that were complemented by periodical videocalls with other European countries as they could measure the development of their level of proficiency in real circumstances. I am well aware of the fact that this is only a small contribution to the issue, but I hope that with further research and the government's aid, TBLT will be soon ready to be applied to English teaching in Catalan high schools. Undoubtedly, these changes will require time, effort and investment but, as this paper has attempted to show, they are fully worthwhile.

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