

Book review

Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching with Technology, Michael Thomas and Hayo Reinders, (Eds). Continuum Publisher, New York, 2010, pp. 242. ISBN-13: 978-1441101532 (hardcover). Price: US\$ 140.00.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) or task-based instruction (TBI) has grown in popularity and has been implemented in L2 learning to promote meaningful use of the target language and develop communicative competence (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004). TBLT moves away from a traditional approach—one that focuses on the study of the language itself—to a communicative approach in which learners engage in authentic interaction with others. Despite the fact that books and articles on TBLT are available for language practitioners to explore the relationship between research and teaching, and further put it into practice, current literature shows that most studies have been conducted mainly in face-to-face traditional classroom settings (Chapelle, 2003; Ellis, 2003). In today’s ever-evolving world of advanced technology, L2 learners are increasingly exposed to web-based learning environments, which are often facilitated by the use of TBI. Ellis notes that “there is still relatively little published about TBLT in technology-mediated contexts.” (*op. cit.*: xvi). To this end, *Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching with Technology*, edited by Michael Thomas and Hayo Reinders, is a welcome addition to the range of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) resources. The edited book is a collaborative work by international contributors with diverse cultural backgrounds and CALL experiences that bring unique perspectives to the reader. The text explores many facets of CALL in TBLT including theoretical and practical implications for L2 teaching and learning to demonstrate the affordances and challenges that each context presents.

The book begins with a brief *Foreword* written by Rod Ellis to introduce the text. The book is composed of two parts with an introduction section (Chapter 1) and a final chapter (Chapter 11). The first part of the book is organized into five chapters (Chapters 2–6) concerned with L2 task-based research in CALL. The second part comprises four empirical studies (Chapters 7–10) involving TBI for CALL with learners from various levels of language proficiency and disciplines. In the opening chapter “Deconstructing Tasks and Technology,” Thomas and Reinders highlight the rationales, needs and overarching goal of the book, and give a brief summary of each chapter. The editors argue, “In order for CALL to be more central to language

learning pedagogy and for task-based approaches to make the leap from theory to practice, both approaches need to learn from each other.” (pp. 10–11). The catalyst of the volume was to open a dialogue between TBLT and CALL research by illustrating multi-dimensional perspectives of task-based approaches to support technology-enhanced language learning and teaching. The book ends with a discussion of issues concerning the present, past and future of TBLT in relation to CALL research, and addresses the potential of CALL in the digital world.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of recent studies on the application of computer-mediated communication (CMC) with the focus of intercultural exchanges in TBLT. Using Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of learning in conjunction with the pedagogical approach to TBLT, Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-v. Ditfurth describe the three distinct levels (Levels I, II and III) of an activity system (Engeström, Miettinen & Punamäki, 1999). The authors further explore how activity theory affords compatible theoretical frameworks to integrate TBLT in CMC drawn from interdisciplinary perspectives. Based on CMC research findings, the authors illustrate how L2 learners engage in online exchanges (Level II) using mediated tools and artifacts (Level I). During the exchange, learners participate in the virtual community (Level III) through which the teacher and students work collaboratively to execute various types of tasks. The authors conclude that the effectiveness of CMC depends on motives, goals and conditions of language learning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Chapter 3 “Task-Based Language Teaching in Network-Based CALL: An Analysis of Research on Learner Interaction in Synchronous CMC” examines nine research studies on chat-based communication drawn from psycholinguistic and sociocultural interactionist perspectives. In Chapter 3 Peterson discusses the beneficial effects of various tasks on the application of synchronous CMC for L2 learning, such as the use of jigsaw, information gap, and decision-making tasks to promote negotiation of meaning and form. While the author claims that the limited evidence of linguistic focus minimizes the potential of network-based learning, a minor disappointment is that there is no mention of Lee’s (2008) recent synchronous CMC study on focus-on-form through collaborative scaffolding in expert-to-novice online interaction in the chapter. The inclusion of the study could provide the reader with useful information on how text-based CMC has the potential to expand learners’ communicative-focus interaction to focus-on-form. Nevertheless, it remains clear that future CMC research should consider specific tasks and procedures to foster linguistic accuracy in order to maintain a balance between meaning and form.

In Chapter 4, Schulze gives an overview of intelligent CALL (ICALL) and discusses the role of task design with examples of TBLT in ICALL. Using natural language processing technologies in online learning environments, Schulze shows how TBLT has made contributions to ICALL over the last 30 years. The author describes a number of early ICALL projects focused on the development of learners’ communicative language competence, such as FAMILIA, Herr Kommissar, FLUENT I and FLUENT II. Using Willis’s (1996) pre-task, during-task and post-task design to promote second language acquisition, the author introduces recent ICALL projects. For example, *ELDIT*, an electronic dictionary, was designed to support the during-task and post-task of German and Italian reading activities and vocabulary acquisition, whereas *QuickAssist* facilitates the learning of German vocabulary “through the

automatic annotation and lemmatization of texts selected by the students or their instructor” (p. 74). Schulze concludes that the appropriate use of task design is key to the success of ICALL.

Chapter 5 starts with discussion of how multiple modes of CMC, such as the combined application of text-chat and e-mail, and the use of text, video and image in one single task carry different pedagogical implications. For example, a text-chat with native speakers using free topics is more meaning-focused with less accuracy, as learners are given less time to focus on form. In contrast, e-mail exchange, as asynchronous CMC (ACMC) along with more structured tasks allows learners more time to produce output. Consequently, they achieve more language production and fewer linguistic errors. Stockwell continues the discussion by reporting a research study involving Japanese learners of English who used SCMC (text-chat) and ACMC (discussion forum) to carry out a variety of teacher-assigned tasks. The study examined lexical density, grammatical accuracy and complexity of CMC discourse. As a result, students benefitted from using both SCMC and ACMC to develop their language skills. Despite the fact that the multimodality of CMC enables L2 learners to engage in interaction according to their personal needs and preferences, the author argues that teachers should keep in mind that the use of different modes has different effects on each individual learner.

Within the CMC context, Collentine in Chapter 6 begins the discussion by pointing out a number of issues concerning TBLT and CALL, and highlights the crucial role of task types that promote language complexity including lexical and morphological features. The author explains the need to study learners’ language complexity beyond the use of T-Unit (e.g., the amount of subordination). Accordingly, she presents a multidimensional factor analysis of a corpus-based process using samples of intermediate and advanced level of students of Spanish who participated in two task-based SCMC conditions using *iChat* and the *Flash* software. Both conditions required within task planning. However, the interrupted task chatting activity occurred at intervals during the task, whereas the post-task chatting activity was treated as a final step of the activity. A three-step analysis of using the nominal cluster, the narrative cluster and the prepositional complexity cluster provides a new approach to the understanding of linguistic complexity of SCMC.

Unlike CMC within institutional settings, Chapter 7 shifts the focus on the task design for the virtual learning environment in the context of distance learning courses. Hampel remarks that course management systems (CMS) not only provide L2 learners with online resources but also allow them to use both synchronous and asynchronous communication tools. The author first presents a model for task development through which both the traditional modes of delivery (e.g., audio, visual materials and face-to-face tutorials) and e-learning (e.g., synchronous and asynchronous tools) were implemented in the Open University distance courses. By reporting the results from the two studies based on Klapper’s (2003) and Ellis’s (2003) approaches to TBLT, the author discusses the important role of design, input, and the linguistic and cognitive complexity of the task. The author argues that “tasks have to be developed in a way that incorporates into the materials much of what the teacher does in the face-to-face classroom in terms of support to provide the necessary scaffolding” (p. 151).

Chapter 8 “Teacher Development, TBLT and Technology” written by Raith and Hegelheimer centers on the discussion of how TBLT competences are assessed through the use of e-portfolios in teacher education. A standard-based model of task-based teaching competencies includes the introduction to tasks to motivate students, the interaction and negotiation to support task performance and the evaluation of task as process. By presenting qualitative findings based on a large-scale research study of a teacher-training program in Germany, the authors suggest that reflective practice guided by the criteria for standard-based questions is effective for the development of TBLT, and allows student teachers to develop competencies through online feedback in a community of practice.

In Chapter 9, the author reports on a case study of an intelligent CALL program entitled *Edubba* for professional journalism. *Edubba* is language learning software, which is supported by the concept of natural language processing – the interaction between the human and the computer. Using the criteria for a task defined by Ellis (2003), *Edubba*’s learning tasks engage learners in real-world language use, which involves negotiation of meaning, cognitive processes and focus on form. Authentic learning tasks allow students to use the target language in a virtual-world networking environment like *Second Life*. The author concludes that simulations such as *Edubba* provide learners with affordable opportunities to explore reading, listening and writing skills within the emerging TBLT framework.

Use of Web 2.0 tools, such as blogs, wikis and 3-D virtual worlds has drawn increasing attention to TBLT. In Chapter 10, Hauck discusses the importance of developing online literacy skills and the crucial role of teacher training within the context of telecollaboration. The author outlines a telecollaborative project involving in-service, pre-service teachers and language learners from four cross-cultural institutions (the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom and Poland) and stresses the factors that affect task design and its implementation in TBLT. Language learners need to show multi-modal communicative competence involving skills to process various types of information (e.g., audio, visual or video) to engage efficiently in online exchanges. Hauck concludes that teacher partners need to “reach joint decisions about task design, implementation flexibility and openness to alternative views and approaches” (p. 212) in order to make online exchange projects successful.

In the final *Afterword* chapter, the authors examine the present, past and future of TBLT with technology, highlighting the potential of CALL by discussing two projects: (1) LANCELOT – funded by the European Commission using Skype to deliver desktop videoconferencing, and (2) AVALON – focused on the use of *Second Life* for the 21st century virtual learning environment. By presenting a number of critical objections to TBLT (Ellis, 2003), the authors propose useful frameworks for further research on digital technologies and its implications for using TBLT in CALL.

In conclusion, the chapters of this edited book combine both strong theoretical frameworks and practical pedagogical applications. Given the depth and breadth of topics discussed in the book, it has made a solid contribution to the field of TBLT with technology. The book offers new insights into our understanding of online task-based learning and teaching through reviews of current CALL research and discussions on empirical studies using available CMC tools within a variety of L2 learning contexts. This book should be of immediate interest to language

educators, and it will be an extremely valuable resource for those who are working with the 21st century technologically savvy language learners. Language educators who are interested in using TBI for virtual learning environments will find the book informative and useful.

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