

Talking it through with teachers

Jonathan Newton's reflections on coursebooks, challenges, and opportunities for TBLT

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This interview with Jonathan Newton explores key issues in task-based language teaching (TBLT), focusing on the relationship between TBLT and textbooks, and the potential for TBLT teacher development building on existing practices and materials. Newton challenges the wholesale rejection of textbooks in TBLT, arguing for “taskification” of existing materials as a pragmatic approach for teachers. He discusses the utility and limitations of task criteria (Meaning, Gap, Own Resources, Outcome – “MGOO”) as a heuristic for teachers, emphasizing the need for clearer conceptualization and application across different task types. The interview highlights the importance of building on teachers’ existing practices when introducing TBLT principles, rather than approaching TBLT from a highly theoretical angle. Newton reflects on TBLT implementation in Asian contexts, noting the diversity of educational settings and the potential of TBLT to enhance student motivation and agency. The interview underscores the value of teacher-researcher collaboration in developing practical, context-appropriate TBLT approaches.

Jonathan Newton has worked in language teaching and language teacher education for more than thirty years in both New Zealand and China. He is currently Programme Director for the Master of TESOL and Master of Applied Linguistics programmes at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. In his career in language teacher education, he has worked alongside teachers from many countries to better understand classroom language teaching and learning, especially in relation to task-based language teaching (TBLT), teaching listening and speaking, teaching vocabulary, and teaching for intercultural capabilities.

TASK: Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview, Jonathan! We wanted to start off with going back to your plenary at the TBLT conference in Thailand (Newton, 2023), which was fantastic. To get us started, would you walk us through the main ideas that you developed during that plenary? What were the main take-away messages that you wanted to convey to the audience and the broader TBLT community?

Jonathan Newton: In this talk I wanted to push back against the views of some in the TBLT community that textbooks are not a legitimate basis for language teaching and certainly not for task-based teaching. While I'm aware of the limitations of textbooks, this position risks making TBLT largely irrelevant to the thousands of language teachers for whom textbooks are an indispensable resource or at least one that is mandated by their institution or national curriculum (as in, for example, China and Vietnam). I'm all for building bridges between teachers and researchers, and theory and practice, so to me that's a risk that needs mitigating. And so, in the talk I attempted to counter the two main arguments mounted against textbooks within TBLT.

The first of these arguments is that textbooks, by their very nature, chop language up and present it in digestible bits, structure by structure, lesson by lesson. This is what Long & Crookes (1993) refer to as a synthetic syllabus, wherein linguistic forms are presented in a linear, sequential order, ostensibly from simple to complex. In contrast, in TBLT, it is tasks not linguistic forms that are the fundamental unit of analysis around which a syllabus is designed. I countered this argument with the fairly obvious point that textbooks come in many shapes and sizes and are continuing to evolve (despite some evidence to the contrary – see Gregson's (2003) survey of global English language primary school textbooks, which paints a rather bleak picture). I've especially seen this evolution in recently developed textbook series written to align with nationally mandated curriculum guidelines for primary and secondary school EFL in countries such as Vietnam, China, and Malaysia. As I work primarily with teachers from China and SE Asia, I can only speak to these contexts. In many of these new textbooks, we see a strong shift towards an emphasis on communication skills, with lessons and units based around themes and skills-based activities and not around a synthetic syllabus. While explicit language focused activities are still present (there'd likely be a teacher and/or parent revolt if they weren't), they play more of a supportive rather than a leading role in these textbooks. Now, these textbooks are still some way from 'task-based', but the alignment is very much closer than the critics of textbooks might lead us to believe, at least in the textbooks I've analyzed.

This leads me to the second often-voiced criticism of textbooks in the TBLT community, namely that textbooks adopt a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. This

approach is contrary to the ideal TBLT situation in which a needs analysis identifies the target tasks a group of learners need to perform and, on this basis, teachers and/or course developers create a curriculum based on bespoke pedagogic versions of these tasks. Yes, there are real limitations with a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach — content will often be too generic because it is designed to cater to the needs of thousands of teachers. But many teachers who are not paid particularly well and have a crushing workload need resources at their fingertips. To give you a concrete example, earlier today I was talking to a Chinese teacher who teaches twenty 45-minute periods a week over 16-week semesters. Imagine telling this guy that he needs to design his own lessons without pre-made resources. But my main response to this criticism of textbooks is that, since textbooks are here to stay, perhaps we could also focus on teacher agency. This means equipping teachers with understanding of tasks and TBLT and skills so that they can identify task affordances in textbooks and then, armed with this information, adapt textbook activities to strengthen their task-likeness. In Bui and Newton (2021) we reported on how some primary school teachers in Vietnam were already doing this by adding communicative activities in the first two phases of the textbook PPP (Presentation-Practice-Production) lessons. One teacher reported actually beginning her lessons by getting learners to do the ‘production’ communicative activity that is situated at the end of each lesson. I’m reminded of a phrase Jing Yixuan, one of my recent PhD graduates used when helping secondary school teachers in China to adapt their textbooks: “Use the textbook, don’t *teach* the textbook.” (Jing, 2024).

TASK: That part of the plenary was very powerful, especially because it does resonate with the important concept of teacher agency. Later in the plenary, you also talked about how teachers using a textbook can taskify the book or turn non-task-based materials into tasks. Can you share what you mean by that, perhaps along with some of the great examples you gave?

What was particularly compelling in your talk, for us at least, was the actionability of the examples you gave for “taskification”. Can you say a little bit more about that?

Jonathan Newton: Let me give you three examples. First, Trang Bui, who I’ve just mentioned and who conducted her PhD under my supervision, investigated the teaching of speaking lessons in primary schools in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam (Bui, 2019). Trang is a lecturer and teacher educator at a local university in this area. The lessons, as noted above, have a PPP structure, and in her teacher education work she observed how ineffective this kind of lesson often was. So, for her PhD project, she redesigned a series of grades 3 and 4 lessons so that they began with an input-based task, followed by a pairwork information gap task and

concluded with the structure-focused content in each lesson, partly addressed through feedback on public performances of the pairwork tasks (Bui & Newton, 2020). As we report in an early preliminary report on this research (Newton & Bui, 2018) these redesigned lessons increased learner engagement and language use, and teachers reported positively on the experience of teaching these lessons and their effectiveness.

Second, Jing Yixuan (2024) worked alongside EFL teachers at a rural Chinese secondary school in the North-West of China, helping them adapt their textbook using principles from TBLT. An example I particularly like is Jing's approach to adapting a reading lesson in the textbook in which students were to read two short recounts by two students of their respective visits to a museum, and they answer some comprehension questions. The teacher would typically teach lessons like this by explaining the grammar and vocabulary, doing a lot of translation, and finally having students answer the questions as silent book work. In the revised lesson, the students worked in groups of four to come up with questions about the content of the texts that they would ask the teacher as a way of testing the teacher. The group who asked the most questions were the 'star' group for the day. From Jing's account the students were really motivated by this activity and came up with a really interesting range of questions, quite a few of which went beyond the actual content of the text. Here are three of them: "What kind of robot did Helen like?", "Can robot fight?", "Why was it so dark in the museum?". To help the students produce such well-formed questions in their groups, the teacher circulated around, helping with grammar and so forth. Now, this is not a 'task' in a strict sense of the word, but it draws on principles from TBLT.

A third example is a grade 3 textbook activity in which learners read a short passage, 'Look at my school things' in which a pupil describes in simple sentences the school things and their colours (e.g., "This is my school bag. It is brown. My books and notebook are blue." Etc.). Below the passage is a simple table, with rows being each school thing, and columns being colours. The activity requires learners to read the passage and tick the correct colour for each thing.

When I recently worked with a group of primary teachers, we explored ways to taskify this activity. I suggested two options. In option 1, the learners do the activity as in the textbook as described above and then the teacher says,

"I'm going to tell you about the school things that two more pupils, Lin and Pan bought to school today. Now, each of these pupils forgot two things. Listen and tick what they bought to school. Then work in pairs and figure out what they forgot. [Activity proceeds]. Now I'm going to tell you the colours of their school things. As you listen, fill in the same table for Jin and Pan.

Your goal is to find the one school thing that is the same colour for all three pupils and the one school thing that is a different colour for all three pupils” (these instructions could be in L1 or in a mix of L1 and L2).

You can see that very little in the way of additional resources is needed and probably less than 10 minutes of planning time. And yet the result is, to my mind, a much richer learning experience based on a relatively simply application of task design principles.

A second option involves strengthening the authenticity or real-world relevance. The teacher would introduce the activity by saying “The school things for three students got mixed up when the desks were moved around in their classroom. Can you help each pupil to get their school things back?”. For this, the teacher can first get the pupils to fill out the table as above but noting that this is just to show who has which particular school things now, even though some of the things are mixed up. The teacher then described the correct colours for the school things for each pupil and the learners have to carefully listen and change incorrect information in the table to find the six things that are mixed up and find out who the correct owners are.

Both options involve input-based tasks, which are ideal for young beginners. These tasks offer plenty of repetition of target vocabulary and useful structures, but it is always meaning-focused and attended to by the learners with the task outcome in mind.

TASK: Do you think that this kind of textbook taskification is doable for any teacher? Is there training required to do it? Is it more of a mindset and agency issue? What are your thoughts here?

Jonathan Newton: Good question. A few of the studies I’ve supervised offer some evidence to help us answer this question. In the Bui and Newton (2021) study I described earlier, we showed that some teachers were adding task-like communicative activities or features to activities without any training or awareness of TBLT. Others weren’t. Hao Dao, another of my PhD graduates addressed this question directly in her project. In the first phase of her research, she found that her three case study teachers who had no awareness of tasks or TBLT were consistently ‘de-tasking’ the textbook activities by, for example, turning pair-work tasks into teacher-led instruction (Dao & Newton, 2021). The second phase of the research was a participatory action research (PAR) project in which she workshopped TBLT principles with the teachers and then observed their lessons. There was a dramatic shift in the communicativeness of the lessons and successful use of tasks. That second phase hasn’t seen it’s way into publication yet, but it deserves to. Her PhD is available for download via the references below.

Another of my PhD graduates, Paweena Jaruteerapan from Thailand, did an interesting study on exposing student teachers to TBLT in the fourth year of their studies and observing its uptake in their final teaching practicum (Jaruteerapan, 2020). Initially, she found little evidence that learning about TBLT in their fourth year teaching methods course had any impact at all on their practicum lessons and teaching, but after a transitional intervention in which she helped them with lesson planning, evidence of task principles emerged in their subsequent lessons in which she was not involved.

Back to your question, yes, the teacher mindset is a critical factor. Jing (2024) report how certain of the teachers in her participating rural school in China were really hungry to learn new things and open to using tasks, and that made all the difference for her study. Likewise, the Vietnamese teachers in Hao Dao's and Trang Bui's studies were curious and keen to know more about tasks. But I've also got plenty of anecdotal evidence of teachers resisting the move away from lessons dominated by teacher-fronted forms-focused instruction. This can be for a whole lot of different reasons – cultural preferences, personality, pressure from parents, pressure from an exam-focused system, and very challenging contextual factors such as large classes (40+) squeezed into inadequate classroom spaces (which I discuss in Newton et al., 2022).

TASK: Your and your students' experiences bring up another interesting question that the TBLT field has been grappling with for a while now, which is the utility of the task criteria (Ellis, 2003), and whether those are a useful heuristic for “judging” or evaluating peoples' uptake and implementation of TBLT. From what you have described, you and your students have documented evidence of teachers taskifying existing materials, and not necessarily going about this via the task criteria as the entry point for shifting teacher practices. What are your thoughts on this?

Jonathan Newton: That is a great question. I think the four task criteria proposed by Ellis (Meaning, Gap, Own Resources, and Communicative Outcome) are a powerful heuristic for understanding tasks. But they are also really difficult to translate into an operational tool that can be used to reliably differentiate tasks from non-tasks, especially when coding activities in textbooks that were not designed from a TBLT standpoint. For example, if, prior to the potential task, there is some instruction on useful structures to use in the task or if a sample dialogue is provided from which the learner can borrow structures, do either of these options violate the 'own resources' criteria? In my experience of coding tasks, the answer is 'sometimes yes, sometimes no', depending on a more granulated evaluation of the specific content of the activities. But this is hardly a satisfactory answer from an operational perspective.

The task criteria are also problematic when applied to identifying or designing input-based tasks, such as task-based reading. Consider a typical reading comprehension activity (read and answer questions about the reading). Teachers who I've asked to code this kind of activity often argue that it meets all four criteria: there's a focus on meaning as students find information in the text; there's a gap as they search for answers to questions; they have to apply their own resources to answers from the text; and the outcome is that you've answered the questions. Now, I don't think this analysis is correct, but it does reveal the work to be done to make these criteria easily interpretable by teachers. A point I make with input-based tasks is that answering comprehension questions is (just) comprehension for the sake of comprehension — there is no task/communicative outcome.

However, there are examples of good input-based tasks that do meet the criteria effectively. One simple example from the Harris and Leeming (2018) textbook, '*On Task*' involves a text about how long it takes to buy different items like cheese, toilet paper, cat food, a car, and a house. The task requires the learners to rank these items in a table from longest to shortest purchase time before they read. They can do this interactively and give reasons for their choices. They then read to compare their ranking with the findings of the research reported in the reading. To me, as simple as it is, this meets all four task criteria: the primary focus is on meaning, the ranking activity creates a gap to be filled by the article, the learners have come up with their own ranking, and there is an outcome involving use of language for a purpose.

Finally, as evidence of the heuristic value of these criteria, a graduate from my master's course on TBLT a year out from having completed the course said that every time she goes to class, she thinks, 'MGOO' (Meaning, Gap, Own resources, Outcome).

TASK: That sounds like it would work in a teacher workshop too.

Jonathan Newton: Absolutely, yes. One way to do this is to have teachers describe how they have taught a textbook lesson and their rationale for their teaching decisions and then introduce the task criteria and have them re-evaluate their activities and rationale. Or more simply, they could just look for tasks and task-like activities in their resources and explain how the four criteria are or are not met.

TASK: Working from concrete examples like you are describing and analyzing the examples probably works better than starting with the abstract task criteria definitions. Definitely something for TBLT teacher educators to experiment with!

Another key idea that you developed at plenary was this whole idea of cooperation between teachers, publishers, and researchers. Can you elaborate a little bit on that idea? How do you feel teachers, textbook writers, researchers, and teacher trainers should cooperate, because it seems like very often, these roles exist in silos.

Jonathan Newton: Yes, I agree. I don't recall seeing a conference strand or symposium which brings together TBLT researchers, teachers, and textbook writers. Perhaps this idea could be picked up at a future TBLT conference. On this theme, I have noticed few information gap activities in my recent analyses of textbooks. This is probably for practical reasons because ensuring a gap when two students have the same textbook would require additional steps (e.g., partner A turn to page X, and partner B turn to page Y). And yet information gap tasks have been well researched in our field and findings have shown benefits for these kind of convergent, closed tasks over divergent, open tasks, especially in relation to the amount of effort learners are likely to invest in negotiating for meaning when communication breakdowns occur. Similarly, I've seen a lot more speaking tasks of the "Discuss XYZ with a partner" variety than of the "Discuss XYZ and decide on your group's top three choices to share with the class" variety. The difference between these two activities is that the first is divergent (there is no requirement to converge on opinions or information) and the second is convergent – the group has to agree on a common ranking. From a task perspective, the first of these two 'discuss' activities lack a clearly defined communicative outcome or purpose and so seems really to be just practising speaking for the sake of practising speaking. That said, there has to be room for tasks in which the communicative outcome is communicative behaviour, i.e., practising how to have an effective discussion.

TASK: These are interesting observations. Based on these, what advice might you offer teachers to align more closely with TBLT and, by extension, hopefully improve language learning outcomes? You have already talked about teachers turning textbook activities into more task-based activities or starting with meaning-focused tasks and ending with more language-focused activities. Based on what you just said, would your second piece of advice be to ensure that each task has a clear goal for students to orient to beyond language – that is, more information gaps and convergent tasks?

Jonathan Newton: In a word, yes. Creating a gap (of information, opinion, etc.) if it doesn't already exist in the materials teachers are using is a skill that takes a bit of practice, but it gets easier once you've done it a few times. I gave the example earlier of the activity involving the school things that three pupils bring to school and creating gap by requiring learners to find out which school things are the same colour for all three learners and which are a different colour.

TASK: Our conversation today brings another related topic to mind – the question of the potential for TBLT in different educational contexts in Asia, particularly in grade schools where English is a mandatory, and often eventually a high-stakes-tested, subject. If we zoom out a bit from our conversation on task features and different ways teachers might learn about them, we would love to

get your current thoughts on TBLT in the Asian context, based on your experiences and observations. Over the years, there have been conflicting narratives about compatibility, receptivity, and the potential of TBLT across Asia, especially discussions of obstacles even interested teachers might face. What is your sense? Are teachers keen to experiment with TBLT, or implement TBLT? Are the obstacles today similar to those described over the last decade, and even earlier?

Jonathan Newton: It's a really dynamic scene here (I'm currently teaching a course on TBLT in Thailand). There is now a new generation of teachers who have come through undergraduate and master's programs in TESOL or at least with a TESOL component and so who have at least heard about TBLT. In contrast, not so long ago, many teachers in Asia gained their degree in translation or English Studies programs focused on literature or theoretical linguistics. Also, because communicative skills and tasks are often mentioned in language policy and curricula, TBLT and tasks has become, dare I say it, quite fashionable. I hope its more than fashion of course, but I have a constant stream of enquiries from teachers in Asia wanting to do a PhD on some aspect of tasks.

Something else that has changed, especially in urban areas (which is unfortunately creating a starker urban-rural divide) is a huge demand for extra-curricular language classes, especially in Vietnam, where the private market is skyrocketing. Kids are going to English schools, English afterschool programs, summer camps and programs, and engaging online in ways that they weren't doing so much a decade or so ago. This is leading to a noticeable growth in proficiency levels among young learners in some parts of Asia, Vietnam in particular.

In terms of obstacles that prevent teachers from engaging with TBLT, for teachers everywhere, including Asia, classroom management can be a make-or-break issue. When you teach a large, diverse class of kids (and classes often contain 40+ students) who don't really want to study English, you need a pedagogy that is going to survive those kinds of challenges. I am not sure that TBLT has engaged as much as it could with large class contexts in which there may only be 2–3 class periods a week and all learners share an L1.

TASK: One final question for you, Jonathan, based on what you have told us today. You've mentioned in quite a few of the studies that you've supervised recently, once teachers started working with tasks in their classrooms, trying out tasks, students became really enthusiastic. The question we have, then, is, how important is the student voice in thinking about implementing TBLT? It stands to reason that if the students are enthusiastic, then the teacher might become enthusiastic about TBLT, which might help with sustainability, especially with the challenges or growing pains that come with changing one's pedagogy. So, do you think

that we (TBLT researchers) should try and find out more about the students and how they are reacting? Is this a key variable in TBLT implementation research?

Jonathan Newton: Yes, absolutely. The answer is in your question. The ‘micro-evaluation’ of tasks proposed by Rod Ellis (2018) offers useful options to evaluate tasks from the learners’ perspective. In his framework for micro-evaluation he distinguishes between student-based data collected on student motivation and the student experience (e.g., through exit slips), response-based data collected on task performance (e.g., through classroom observation), and learning-based data collected on language development (e.g., through tests and uptake charts). In my own research and research that I’ve supervised, I’ve found focus groups to be a source of really rich data. In one of the studies I supervised, the students said that they wished the teacher would spend less time introducing tasks and modelling how to do them so the learners had more time to do the tasks! I’m not sure how useful that perspective is for research, but it is certainly useful for teaching.

TASK: Thank you so much, Jonathan, for sharing your expertise with us and for giving us and the TBLT community so much food for thought!

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